dived, and only when the last ring of its disturbance had vanished did Mr. Polly resume his thoughtful course to nowhere in particular.

For the first time in many years he had been leading a healthy human life, living constantly in the open air, walking every day for eight or nine hours, eating sparingly, accepting every conversational opportunity, not even disdaining the discussion of possible work. And beyond mending a hole in his coat, that he had made while negotiating barbed wire, with a borrowed needle and thread in a lodging-house, he had done no real work at all. Neither had he worried about business nor about times and seasons. And for the first time in his life he had seen the Aurora Borealis.

So far, the holiday had cost him very little. He had arranged it on a plan that was entirely his own. He had started with four five-pound notes and a pound divided into silver, and he had gone by train from Fishbourne to Ashington. At Ashington he had gone to the post office, obtained a registered letter envelope, and sent his four five-pound notes with a short, brotherly note addressed to himself at Gilhampton Post Office. He sent this letter to Gilhampton for no other reason in the world than that he liked the name of Gilhampton and the rural suggestion of its containing county, which was Sussex; and having so despatched it, he set himself to discover, mark down, and walk to Gilhampton, and so recover his resources. And having got to Gilhampton at last, he changed a five-pound note, bought four pound postal orders, and repeated his manoeuvre with nineteen pounds.

After a lapse of fifteen years he rediscovered this interesting world, about which so many people go incredibly blind and bored. He went along country roads while all the birds were piping and chirruping and cheeping and singing, and looked at fresh new things, and felt as happy and irresponsible as a boy with an unexpected half-holiday. And if ever the thought of Miriam returned to him, he controlled his mind. He came to country inns and sat for unmeasured hours talking of this and that to those sage carters who rest for ever in the taps of country inns, while the big, sleek, brass-jingling horses wait patiently outside with their wagons. He got a job with some van people who were wandering about the country with swings and a steam roundabout,
and remained with them three days, until one of their dogs took a violent dislike to him, and made his duties unpleasant. He talked to tramps and wayside labourers. He snoozed under hedges by day, and in outhouses and hayricks at night, and once, but only once, he slept in a casual yard. He felt as the etiolated grass and daisies must do when you move the garden roller away to a new place.

He gathered a quantity of strange and interesting memories.

He crossed some misty meadows by moonlight and the mist lay low on the grass, so low that it scarcely reached above his waist, and houses and clumps of trees stood out like islands in a milky sea, so sharply defined was the upper surface of the mist-bank. He came nearer and nearer to a strange thing that floated like a boat upon this magic lake, and behold, something moved at the stern, and a rope was whisked at the prow, and it had changed into a pensive cow, drowsy-eyed, regarding him. . . .

He saw a remarkable sunset in a new valley near Maidstone, a very red and clear sunset, a wide redness under a pale, cloudless heaven, and with the hills all round the edge of the sky a deep purple blue and clear and flat, looking exactly as he had seen mountains painted in pictures. He seemed transported to some strange country, and would have felt no surprise if the old labourer he came upon leaning silently over a gate had addressed him in an unfamiliar tongue. . . .

Then one night, just towards dawn, his sleep upon a pile of brushwood was broken by the distant rattle of a racing motor-car breaking all the speed regulations, and as he could not sleep again, he got up and walked into Maidstone as the day came. He had never been abroad in a town at four o’clock in his life before, and the stillness of everything in the bright sunrise impressed him profoundly. At one corner was a startling policeman, standing up in a doorway quite motionless like a waxen image. Mr. Polly wished him ‘good morning’ unanswered, and went down to the bridge over the Medway, and sat on the parapet, very still and thoughtful, watching the town awaken, and wondering what he should do if it didn’t, if the world of men never woke again. . . .

One day he found himself going along a road, with a
wide space of sprouting bracken and occasional trees on either side, and suddenly this road became strangely and perplexingly familiar. "Lord!" he said, and turned about and stood. "It can’t be."

He was incredulous, then left the road and walked along a scarcely perceptible track to the left, and came in half a minute to an old lichenous stone wall. It seemed exactly the bit of wall he had known so well. It might have been but yesterday he was in that place; there remained even a little pile of wood. It became absurdly the same wood. The bracken, perhaps, was not so high, and most of its fronds were still coiled up, that was all. Here he had stood, it seemed, and there she had sat and looked down upon him. Where was she now, and what had become of her? He counted the years back, and marvelled that beauty should have called to him with so imperious a voice—and signified nothing.

He hoisted himself with some little difficulty to the top of the wall, and saw far off under the beech trees two school-girls—small, insignificant, pigtailed creatures, with heads of blonde and black, with their arms twined about each other’s necks, no doubt telling each other the silliest secrets.

But that girl with the red hair—was she a countess? was she a queen? Children, perhaps? Had sorrow dared to touch her?

Had she forgotten altogether? . . .

A tramp sat by the roadside, thinking, and it seemed to the man in the passing motor-car he must needs be plotting for another pot of beer. But, as a matter of fact, what the tramp was saying to himself over and over again, was a variant upon a well-known Hebrew word.

"Itchabod," the tramp was saying in the voice of one who reasons on the side of the inevitable. "It’s Fair Itchabod, O’ Man. There’s no going back to things like that."

It was about two o’clock in the afternoon, one hot day in May, when Mr. Polly, unhurrying and serene, came upon that broad bend of the river to which the little lawn and garden of the Potwell Inn run down. He stopped at the sight of the place and surveyed its deep tiled roof, nesting under big trees—you never get a decently big, decently shaped tree by the seaside—its sign towards the roadway,
its sun-blistered green bench and tables, its shapely white windows and its row of upshooting hollyhock plants in the garden. A hedge separated the premises from a buttercup-yellow meadow, and beyond stood three poplars in a group against the sky, three exceptionally tall, graceful, and harmonious poplars. It is hard to say what there was about them that made them so beautiful to Mr. Polly, but they seemed to him to touch a pleasant scene with a distinction almost divine. He stood admiring them quietly for a long time.

At last the need for coarser æsthetic satisfactions arose in him.

“Provinder,” he whispered, drawing near to the inn. “Cold sirloin, for choice. And nutbrown brew and wheaten bread.”

The nearer he came to the place the more he liked it. The windows on the ground floor were long and low, and they had pleasing red blinds. The green tables outside were agreeably ringed with memories of former drinks, and an extensive grape-vine spread level branches across the whole front of the place. Against the wall was a broken oar, two boat-hooks, and the stained and faded red cushions of a pleasure-boat. One went up three steps to the glass-panelled door and peeped into a broad, low room with a bar and a beer-engine, behind which were many bright and helpful-looking bottles against mirrors, and great and little pewter measures, and bottles fastened in brass wire upside down, with their corks replaced by taps, and a white china cask labelled “Shrub,” and cigar boxes, and boxes of cigarettes, and a couple of Toby jugs and a beautifully coloured hunting scene framed and glazed, showing the most elegant people taking Piper’s Cherry Brandy, and cards such as the law requires about the dilution of spirits and the illegality of bringing children into bars, and satirical verses about swearing and asking for credit, and three very bright, red-cheeked wax apples, and a round-shaped clock.

But these were the mere background to the really pleasant thing in the spectacle, which was quite the plumpest woman Mr. Polly had ever seen, seated in an arm-chair in the midst of all these bottles and glasses and glittering things, peacefully and tranquilly, and without the slightest loss of dignity, asleep. Many people would have called her a fat woman,
but Mr. Polly’s innate sense of epithet told him from the outset that plump was the word. She had shapely brows and a straight, well-shaped nose, kind lines and contentment about her mouth, and beneath it the jolly chins clustered like chubby little cherubim about the feet of an Assumption-ing Madonna. Her plumpness was firm and pink and wholesome, and her hands, dimpled at every joint, were clasped in front of her; she seemed, as it were, to embrace herself with infinite confidence and kindness, as one who knew herself good in substance, good in essence, and would show her gratitude to God by that ready acceptance of all that He had given her. Her head was a little on one side, not much, but just enough to speak of trustfulness, and rob her of the stiff effect of self-reliance. And she slept.

“My sort,” said Mr. Polly, and opened the door very softly, divided between the desire to enter and come nearer, and an instinctive indisposition to break slumbers so manifestly sweet and satisfying.

She awoke with a start, and it amazed Mr. Polly to see swift terror flash into her eyes. Instantly it had gone again.

“Law!” she said, her face softening with relief. “I thought you was Jim.”

“I’m never Jim,” said Mr. Polly.

“You’ve got his sort of hat.”

“Ah!” said Mr. Polly, and leant over the bar.

“It just came into my head you was Jim,” said the plump lady, dismissed the topic and stood up. “I believe I was having forty winks,” she said, “if all the truth was told. What can I do for you?”

“Cold meat?” said Mr. Polly.

“There is cold meat,” the plump woman admitted.

“And room for it.”

The plump woman came and leant over the bar and regarded him judicially but kindly. “There’s some cold boiled beef,” she said, and added, “A bit of crisp lettuce?”

“New mustard,” said Mr. Polly.

“And a tankard!”

“A tankard.”

They understood each other perfectly.

“Looking for work?” asked the plump woman.

“In a way,” said Mr. Polly.

They smiled like old friends.
Whatever the truth may be about love, there is certainly such a thing as friendship at first sight. They liked each other's voices, they liked each other's way of smiling and speaking.

"It's such beautiful weather this spring," said Mr. Polly, explaining everything.

"What sort of work do you want?" she asked.

"I've never properly thought that out," said Mr. Polly. "I've been looking round—for ideas."

"Will you have your beef in the tap or outside? That's the tap."

Mr. Polly had a glimpse of an oaken settle. "In the tap will be handier for you," he said.

"Hear that?" said the plump lady.

"Hear what?"

"Listen."

Presently the silence was broken by a distant howl—"Ooooomoover!" "Eh?" she said.

He nodded.

"That's the ferry. And there isn't a ferryman."

"Could I?"

"Can you punt?"

"Never tried."

"Well—pull the pole out before you reach the end of the punt, that's all. Try."

Mr. Polly went out again into the sunshine.

At times one can tell so much so briefly. Here are the facts then—bare. He found a punt and a pole, got across to the steps on the opposite side, picked up an elderly gentleman in an alpaca jacket and a pith helmet, cruised with him vaguely for twenty minutes, conveyed him tortuously into the midst of a thicket of forget-me-not spangled sedges, splashed some waterweed over him, hit him twice with the punt pole, and finally landed him, alarmed but abusive, in treacherous soil at the edge of a hay meadow about forty yards down-stream, where he immediately got into difficulties with a noisy, aggressive little white dog, which was guarding a jacket.

Mr. Polly returned in a complicated manner, but with perfect dignity, to his moorings.

He found the plump woman rather flushed and tearful, and seated at one of the green tables outside.
"I been laughing at you," she said.
"What for?" asked Mr. Polly.
"I ain't 'ad such a laugh since Jim come 'ome. When you 'it 'is 'ead, it 'urt my side."
"It didn't hurt his head—not particularly."
"Did you charge him anything?"
"Gratis," said Mr. Polly. "I never thought of it."
The plump woman pressed her hands to her sides and laughed silently for a space. "You ought to 'ave charged 'im Sumpthing," she said. "You better come and have your cold meat before you do any more puntin'. You and me'll get on together."
Presently she came and stood watching him eat. "You eat better than you punt," she said; and then, "I dessay you could learn to punt."
"Wax to receive and marble to retain," said Mr. Polly. "This beef is a Bit of All Right, Ma'm. I could have done differently if I hadn't been puntin' on an empty stomach. There's a leer feeling as the pole goes in——"
"I've never held with fasting," said the plump woman.
"You want a ferryman?"
"I want an odd man about the place."
"I'm odd all right. What's the wages?"
"Not much, but you get tips and pickings. I've a sort of feeling it would suit you."
"That's about it," said the fat woman.
"Give me a trial."
"I've more than half a mind. 'Or I wouldn't have said anything about it. I suppose you're all right. You've got a sort of half-respectable look about you. I suppose you 'aven't done anything?"
"Bit of Arson," said Mr. Polly, as if he jested.
"So long as you haven't the habit," said the plump woman.
"My first time, M'am," said Mr. Polly, munching his way through an excellent big leaf of lettuce. "And my last."
"It's all right if you haven't been to prison," said the plump woman. "It isn't what a man's happened to do makes
'im bad. We all happen to do things at times. It's bringing it home to him and spoiling his self-respect does the mischief. You don't look a wrong 'un. 'Ave you been to prison?"  
"Never."
"Nor a Reformatory? Nor any Institution?"
"Not me. Do I look reformed?"
"Can you paint and carpenter a bit?"
"Ripe for it."
"Have a bit of cheese?"
"If I might."

And the way she brought the cheese showed Mr. Polly that the business was settled in her mind.

He spent the afternoon exploring the premises of the Potwell Inn and learning the duties that might be expected of him, such as Stockholm tarring fences, digging potatoes, swabbing out boats, helping people land, embarking, landing, and time-keeping for the hirers of two rowing boats and one Canadian canoe, bailing out the said vessels and concealing their leaks and defects from prospective hirers, persuading inexperienced hirers to start down-stream rather than up, repairing rowlocks and taking inventories of returning boats with a view to supplementary charges, cleaning boots, sweeping chimneys, house painting, cleaning windows, sweeping out and sanding the Tap and Bar, cleaning pewter, washing glasses, turpentine woodwork, whitewashing generally, plumbing and engineering, repairing locks and clocks, waiting and tapster's work generally, beating carpets and mats, cleaning bottles and saving corks, taking into the cellar, moving, tapping, and connecting beer-casks with their engines, blocking and destroying wasps' nests, doing forestry with several trees, drowning superfluous kittens, dog-fancying as required, assisting in the rearing of ducklings and the care of various poultry, bee-keeping, stabling, baiting and grooming horses and asses, cleaning and "garing" motor-cars and bicycles, inflating tyres and repairing punctures, recovering the bodies of drowned persons from the river as required, and assisting people in trouble in the water, first-aid and sympathy, improvising and superintending a bathing station for visitors, attending inquests and funerals in the interests of the establishment, scrubbing floors and all the ordinary duties of a scullion, the Ferry, chasing hens and goats from the adjacent cottages out of the garden, making up paths and
superintending drainage, gardening generally, delivering bottled beer and soda-water siphons in the neighbourhood, running miscellaneous errands, removing drunken and offensive persons from the premises by tact or muscle, as occasion required, keeping in with the local policeman, defending the premises in general and the orchard in particular from nocturnal depredators. . . .

"Can but try it," said Mr. Polly towards tea-time. "When there's nothing else on hand I suppose I might do a bit of fishing."

2

Mr. Polly was particularly charmed by the ducklings.
They were piping about among the vegetables in the company of their foster mother, and as he and the plump woman came down the garden path the little creatures mobbed them, and ran over their boots and in between Mr. Polly's legs, and did their best to be trodden upon and killed after the manner of ducklings all the world over. Mr. Polly had never been near young ducklings before, and their extreme blondness and the delicate completeness of their feet and beaks filled him with admiration. It is open to question whether there is anything more friendly in the world than a very young duckling. It was with the utmost difficulty that he tore himself away to practise punting, with the plump woman coaching from the bank. Punting, he found, was difficult, but not impossible, and towards four o'clock he succeeded in conveying a second passenger across the surging flood from the inn to the unknown.

As he returned, slowly indeed, but now one might almost say surely, to the peg to which the punt was moored, he became aware of a singularly delightful human being awaiting him on the bank. She stood with her legs very wide apart, her hands behind her back, and her head a little on one side, watching his gestures with an expression of disdainful interest. She had black hair and brown legs and a buff short frock and very intelligent eyes. And when he had reached a sufficient proximity she remarked, "Hallo!"

"Hallo," said Mr. Polly, and saved himself in the nick of time from disaster.

"Silly," said the young lady, and Mr. Polly lunged nearer.
"What are you called?"
"Polly."
"Liar!"
"Why?"
"I'm Polly."
"Then I'm Alfred. But I meant to be Polly."
"I was first."
"All right. I'm going to be the ferryman."
"I see. You'll have to punt better."
"You should have seen me early in the afternoon."
"I can imagine it... I've seen the others."
"What others?" Mr. Polly had landed now and was fastening up the punt.
"What Uncle Jim has scooted."
"Scooted?"
"He comes and scoots them. He'll scoot you, too, I expect."

A mysterious shadow seemed to fall athwart the sunshine and pleasantness of the Porwell Inn.
"I'm not a scooter," said Mr. Polly.
"Uncle Jim is."

She whistled a little flatly for a moment, and threw small stones at a clump of meadowsweet that sprang from the bank. Then she remarked:
"When Uncle Jim comes back he'll cut your insides out... P'r'aps, very likely, he'll let me see."

There was a pause.
"Who's Uncle Jim?" Mr. Polly asked in a faded voice.
"Don't know who Uncle Jim is! He'll show you. He's a scorch, is Uncle Jim. He only came back just a little time ago, and he's scooted three men. He don't like strangers about, don't Uncle Jim. He can swear. He's going to teach me, soon as I can whistle properly."
"Teach you to swear!" cried Mr. Polly, horrified.
"And spit," said the little girl proudly. "He says I'm the gamest little beast he ever came across—ever."

For the first time in his life it seemed to Mr. Polly that he had come across something sheerly dreadful. He stared at the pretty thing of flesh and spirit in front of him, lightly balanced on its stout little legs and looking at him with eyes that had still to learn the expression of either disgust or fear.
"I say," said Mr. Polly. "How old are you?"
“Nine,” said the little girl.
She turned away and reflected. Truth compelled her to add one other statement.
“He’s not what I should call handsome, not Uncle Jim,” she said. “But he’s a Scorcher and no Mistake. . . . Gramma don’t like him.”

3

Mr. Polly found the plump woman in the big bricked kitchen lighting a fire for tea. He went to the root of the matter at once.
“I say,” he asked, “who’s Uncle Jim?”
The plump woman blanched and stood still for a moment. A stick fell out of the bundle in her hand unheeded. “That little granddaughter of mine been saying things?” she asked faintly.
“Bits of things,” said Mr. Polly.
“Well, I suppose I must tell you sooner or later. He’s—it’s Jim. He’s the Drorback to this place, that’s what he is. The Drorback. I hoped you mightn’t hear so soon. . . . Very likely he’s gone.”
“She don’t seem to think so.”
“’E ‘asn’t been near the place these two weeks and more,” said the plump woman.
“But who is he?”
“I suppose I got to tell you,” said the plump woman.
“She says he scoots people,” Mr. Polly remarked after a pause.
“He’s my own sister’s son.” The plump woman watched the crackling fire for a space. “I suppose I got to tell you,” she repeated.
She softened towards tears. “I try not to think of it, and night and day he’s haunting me. I try not to think of it. I’ve been for easy-going all my life. But I’m that worried and afraid, with death and ruin threatened and evil all about me! I don’t know what to do! My own sister’s son, and me a widow woman and ’elpless against his doin’s!”

She put down the sticks she held upon the fender, and felt for her handkerchief. She began to sob and talk quickly.
“I wouldn’t mind nothing else half so much if he’d leave
that child alone. But he goes talking to her—if I leave her a moment he's talking to her, teaching her Words, and giving her ideas!"

"That's a Bit Thick," said Mr. Polly.

"Thick!" cried the plump woman; "it's 'orrible! And what am I to do? He's been here three times now, six days, and a week, and a part of a week, and I pray to God night and day he may never come again. Praying! Back he's come, sure as fate. He takes my money and he takes my things. He won't let no man stay here to protect me or do the boats or work the ferry. The ferry's getting a scandal. They stand and shout and scream and use language. . . . If I complain they'll say I'm helpless to manage here, they'll take away my licence, out I shall go—and it's all the living I can get—and he knows it, and he plays on it, and he don't care. And here I am. I'd send the child away, but I got nowhere to send the child. I buys him off when it comes to that, and back he comes, worse than ever, prowling round and doing evil. And not a soul to help me. Not a soul! I just hoped there might be a day or so. Before he comes back again. I was just hoping— I'm the sort that hopes."

Mr. Polly was reflecting on the flaws and drawbacks that seem to be inseparable from all the more agreeable things of life.

"Biggish sort of man, I expect?" asked Mr. Polly, trying to get the situation in all its bearings.

But the plump woman did not heed him. She was going on with her fire-making, and retailing in disconnected fragments the fearfulness of Uncle Jim.

"There was always something a bit wrong with him," she said; "but nothing you mightn't have hoped for, not till they took him, and carried him off, and reformed him . . .

"He was cruel to the hens and chickings, it's true, and stuck a knife into another boy; but then I've seen him that nice to a cat, nobody could have been kinder. I'm sure he didn't do no 'arm to that cat whatever any one tries to make out of it. I'd never listen to that. . . . It was that Reformatory ruined him. They put him along of a lot of London boys full of ideas and wickedness, and because he didn't mind pain—and he don't, I will admit, try as I would—they made him think himself a hero. Them boys laughed at the teachers they set over them, laughed and mocked at them—and I
don’t suppose they was the best teachers in the world; I
don’t suppose, and I don’t suppose any one sensible does
suppose that every one who goes to be a teacher or a chaplain
or a warder in a Reformatory Home goes and changes right
away into an Angel of Grace from Heaven—and, oh Lord!
Where was I?"

“What did they send him to the Reformatory for?”

“Playing truant and stealing. He stole right enough—
stole the money from an old woman, and what was I to do
when it came to the trial, but say what I knew. And him
like a viper a-looking at me—more like a viper than a human
boy. He leans on the bar and looks at me. ‘All right,
Aunt Flo,’ he says; just that, and nothing more. Time
after time I’ve dreamt of it, and now he’s come. ‘They’ve
Reformed me,’ he says, ‘and made me a devil, and devil I
mean to be to you. So out with it,’ he says.”

“What did you give him last time?” asked Mr. Polly.

“Three golden pounds,” said the plump woman. “‘That
won’t last very long,’ he says. ‘But there ain’t no hurry.
I’ll be back in a week about.’ If I wasn’t one of the hoping
sort——”

She left the sentence unfinished.

Mr. Polly reflected. “What sort of a size is he?” he
asked. “I’m not one of your Herculaceous sort, if you
mean that. Nothing very wonderful bicepally.”

“You’ll scoot,” said the plump woman, with conviction
rather than bitterness. “You’d better scoot now, and I’ll
try and find some money for him to go away again when he
comes. It ain’t reasonable to expect you to do anything but
scoot. But I suppose it’s the way of a woman in trouble
to try and get help from a man, and hope and hope.”

“How long’s he been about?” asked Mr. Polly, ignoring
his own outlook.

“Three months it is come the seventh since he come in
by that very back door—and I hadn’t set eyes on him for
seven long years. He stood in the door watchin’ me, and
suddenly he let off a yelp—like a dog, and there he was
grinning at the fright he’d given me. ‘Good old Aunty
Flo,’ he says, ‘ain’t you deelighted to see me,’ he says,
‘now I’m Reformed’?”

The plump lady went to the sink and filled the kettle.

“I never did like ’im,” she said, standing at the sink.
“And seeing him there, with his teeth all black and broken—
Praps I didn’t give him much of a welcome at first. Not
but what I would have been kind to him. ‘Lord!’ I said,
it’s Jim.’”

“It’s Jim,” he said. ‘Like a bad shillin’—like a damned
bad shilling. Jim and trouble. You all of you wanted me
Reformed, and now you got me Reformed. I’m a Reformat-
tory Reformed Character, warranted all right, and turned
out as such. Ain’t you going to ask me in, Aunty dear?”

“‘Come in,’ I said. ‘I won’t have it said I wasn’t ready
to be kind to you!’

“He comes in and shuts the door. Down he sits in that
chair. ‘I come to torment you,’ he says, ‘you old Sump-
thing!’ and begins at me. . . . No ’uman being could ever
have been called such things before. It made me cry out.
‘And now,’ he says, ‘just to show I ain’t afraid of ’urting
you,’ he says, and ups and twists my wrist.”

Mr. Polly gasped.

“I could stand even his vi’lence,” said the plump woman,
“if it wasn’t for the child.”

Mr. Polly went to the kitchen window and surveyed
his namesake, who was away up the garden path, with her
hands behind her back, and wisps of black hair in disorder about
her little face, thinking, thinking profoundly, about ducklings.

“You two oughtn’t to be left,” he said.

The plump woman stared at his back with hard hope in
her eyes.

“I don’t see that it’s my affair,” said Mr. Polly.

The plump woman resumed her business with the kettle.
“I’d like to have a look at him before I go,” said Mr.
Polly, thinking aloud, and added, “somehow. Not my
business, of course.”

“Lord!” he cried, with a start, at a noise in the bar,
“who’s that?”

“Only a customer,” said the plump woman.

Mr. Polly made no rash promises, and thought a great
deal.

“It seems a good sort of Crib,” he said, and added, “for
a chap who’s looking for Trouble.”
But he stayed on, and did various things out of the list I have already given, and worked the ferry, and it was four days before he saw anything of Uncle Jim. And so resistant is the human mind to things not yet experienced, that he could easily have believed in that time that there was no such person in the world as Uncle Jim. The plump woman, after her one outbreak of confidences, ignored the subject, and little Polly seemed to have exhausted her impressions in her first communication, and engaged her mind now, with a simple directness, in the study and subjugation of the new human being Heaven had sent into her world. The first unfavourable impression of his punting was soon effaced; he could nickname ducklings very amusingly, create boats out of wooden splinters, and stalk and fly from imaginary tigers in the orchard, with a convincing earnestness that was surely beyond the power of any other human being. She conceded at last that he should be called Mr. Polly, in honour of her, Miss Polly, even as he desired.

Uncle Jim turned up in the twilight.

Uncle Jim appeared with none of the disruptive violence Mr. Polly had dreaded. He came quite softly. Mr. Polly was going down the lane behind the church, that led to the Potwell Inn, after posting a letter to the lime-juice people at the post office. He was walking slowly, after his habit, and thinking discursively. With a sudden tightening of the muscles he became aware of a figure walking noiselessly beside him.

His first impression was of a face singularly broad above, and with a wide, empty grin as its chief feature below, of a slouching body and dragging feet.

"'Arf a mo'," said the figure, as if in response to his start, and speaking in a hoarse whisper. "'Arf a mo', mister. You the noo bloke at the Porwell Inn?"

Mr. Polly felt evasive. "S'pose I am," he replied hoarsely, and quickened his pace.

"'Arf a mo'," said Uncle Jim, taking his arm. "We ain't doing a (sanguinary) Marathon. It ain't a (decorated) cinder track. I want a word with you, mister. See?"

Mr. Polly wriggled his arm free and stopped. "What is it?" he asked, and faced the terror.

"I jest want a (decorated) word wiv you. See?—just a friendly word or two. Just to clear up any blooming errors.
That's all I want. No need to be so (richly decorated) proud, if you are the noo bloke at Potwell Inn. Not a bit of it. See?"

Uncle Jim was certainly not a handsome person. He was short, shorter than Mr. Polly, with long arms and lean, big hands; a thin and wiry neck stuck out of his grey flannel shirt, and supported a big head that had something of the snake in the convergent lines of its broad, knobby brow, mealy proportioned face, and pointed chin. His almost toothless mouth seemed a cavern in the twilight. Some accident had left him with one small and active, and one large and expressionless reddish eye, and wisps of straight hair strayed from under the blue cricket cap he pulled down obliquely over the latter. He spat between his teeth, and wiped his mouth untidily with the soft side of his fist.

"You got to blurry well shift," he said. "See?"
"Shift!" said Mr. Polly. "How?"
"'Cos the Potwell Inn's my beat. See?"

Mr. Polly had never felt less witty. "How's it your beat?" he asked.

Uncle Jim thrust his face forward and shook his open hand, bent like a claw, under Mr. Polly's nose. "Not your blooming business," he said. "You got to shift."

"S'pose I don't," said Mr. Polly.
"You got to shift."

The tone of Uncle Jim's voice became urgent and confidential.

"You don't know who you're up against," he said. "It's a kindness I'm doing to warn you. See? I'm just one of those blokes who don't stick at things, see? I don't stick at nuffin."

Mr. Polly's manner became detached and confidential—as though the matter and the speaker interested him greatly, but didn't concern him over much. "What do you think you'll do?" he asked.

"If you don't clear out?"
"Yes."

"Gaw!" said Uncle Jim. "You'd better! 'Ere!"

He gripped Mr. Polly's wrist with a grip of steel, and in an instant Mr. Polly understood the relative quality of their muscles. He breathed, an uninspiring breath, into Mr. Polly's face.
“What won’t I do,” he said, “once I start in on you?”

He paused, and the night about them seemed to be listening. “I’ll make a mess of you,” he said, in his hoarse whisper. “I’ll do you—injuries. I’ll ’urt you. I’ll kick you ugly, see? I’ll ’urt you in ’orrible ways—’orrible ugly ways. . . .”

He scrutinised Mr. Polly’s face.

“You’ll cry,” he said, “to see yourself. See? Cry, you will.”

“You got no right,” began Mr. Polly.

“Right!” His note was fierce. “Ain’t the old woman me aunt?”

He spoke still closelier. “I’ll make a gory mess of you. I’ll cut bits orf you——”

He receded a little. “I got no quarrel with you,” he said.

“It’s too late to go to-night,” said Mr. Polly.

“I’ll be round to-morrer—’bout eleven. See? And if I finds you——”

He produced a blood-curdling oath.

“H’m,” said Mr. Polly, trying to keep things light. “We’ll consider your suggestions.”

“You better,” said Uncle Jim, and suddenly, noiselessly, was going.

His whispering voice sank until Mr. Polly could hear only the dim fragments of sentences. “’Orrible things to you—’Orrible things. . . . Kick yer Ugly. . . . Cut yer—liver out . . . spread it all about, I will. . . . See? I don’t care a dead rat one way or the uvver.”

And with a curious twisting gesture of the arm, Uncle Jim receded until his face was a still, dim thing that watched, and the black shadows of the hedge seemed to have swallowed up his body altogether.

Next morning about half-past ten Mr. Polly found himself seated under a clump of fir-trees by the roadside, and about three miles and a half from the Potwell Inn. He was by no means sure whether he was taking a walk to clear his mind, or leaving that threat-marred Paradise for good and all.
His reason pointed a lean, unhesitating finger along the latter course.

For, after all, the thing was not his quarrel.

That agreeable, plump woman—agreeable, motherly, comfortable as she might be—wasn’t his affair; that child with the mop of black hair, who combined so magically the charm of mouse and butterfly and flitting bird, who was daintier than a flower and softer than a peach, was no concern of his. Good Heavens! What were they to him? Nothing! . . .

Uncle Jim, of course, had a claim, a sort of claim.

If it came to duty and chucking up this attractive, indolent, observant, humorous, tramping life, there were those who had a right to him, a legitimate right, a prior claim on his protection and chivalry.

Why not listen to the call of duty and go back to Miriam now? . . .

He had had a very agreeable holiday. . . .

And while Mr. Polly sat thinking these things as well as he could, he knew that if only he dared to look up, the Heavens had opened, and the clear judgment on his case was written across the sky.

He knew—he knew now as much as a man can know of life. He knew he had to fight or perish.

Life had never been so clear to him before. It had always been a confused, entertaining spectacle. He had responded to this impulse and that, seeking agreeable and entertaining things, evading difficult and painful things. Such is the way of those who grow up to a life that has neither danger nor honour in its texture. He had been muddled and wrapped about and entangled, like a creature born in the jungle who has never seen sea or sky. Now he had come out of it suddenly into a great exposed place. It was as if God and Heaven waited over him, and all the earth was expectation.

"Not my business," said Mr. Polly, speaking aloud.

"Where the devil do I come in?"

And again, with something between a whine and a snarl in his voice, "Not my blasted business!"

His mind seemed to have divided itself into several compartments, each with its own particular discussion busily in progress, and quite regardless of the others. One was busy with the detailed interpretation of the phrase, "Kick
you ugly." There's a sort of French wrestling in which you use and guard against feet. Watch the man's eyes, and as his foot comes up, grip, and over he goes—at your mercy, if you use the advantage rightly. But how do you use the advantage rightly?

When he thought of Uncle Jim the inside feeling of his body faded away rapidly to a blank discomfort. . . .

"Old cadger! She hadn't no business to drag me into her quarrels. Ought to go to the police and ask for help! Dragging me into a quarrel that don't concern me.

"Wish I'd never set eyes on the rotten inn!"

The reality of the case arched over him like the vault of the sky, as plain as the sweet blue heaven above and the wide spread of hill and valley about him. Man comes into life to seek and find his sufficient beauty, to serve it, to win and increase it, to fight for it, to face anything and dare anything for it, counting death as nothing so long as the dying eyes still turn to it. And fear and dullness and indolence and appetite, which, indeed, are no more than fear's three crippled brothers, who make ambushes and creep by night, are against him, to delay him, to hold him off, to hamper and beguile and kill him in that quest. He had but to lift his eyes to see all that, as much a part of his world as the driving clouds and the bending grass; but he kept himself downcast, a grumbling, inglorious, dirty, fattish little tramp, full of dreams and quivering excuses.

"Why the hell was I ever born?" he said, with the truth almost winning him.

What do you do when a dirty man, who smells, gets you down and under, in the dirt and dust, with a knee below your diaphragm, and a large hairy hand squeezing your windpipe tighter and tighter in a quarrel that isn't, properly speaking, yours?

"If I had a chance against him——" protested Mr. Polly.

"It's no Good, you see," said Mr. Polly.

He stood up as though his decision was made, and was for an instant struck still by doubt.

There lay the road before him, going this way to the east, and that to the west.

Westward, one hour away now, was the Potwell Inn. Already things might be happening there. . . .

Eastward was the wise man's course, a road dipping
between hedges to a hop garden and a wood, and presently, no doubt, reaching an inn, a picturesque church, perhaps, a village, and fresh company. The wise man's course. Mr. Polly saw himself going along it, and tried to see himself going along it with all the self-applause a wise man feels. But somehow it wouldn't come like that. The wise man fell short of happiness for all his wisdom. The wise man had a paunch, and round shoulders, and red ears, and excuses. It was a pleasant road, and why the wise man should not go along it merry and singing, full of summer happiness, was a miracle to Mr. Polly's mind. But, confound it! the fact remained: the figure went slinking—slinking was the only word for it—and would not go otherwise than slinking. He turned his eyes westward as if for an explanation, and if the figure was no longer ignoble, the prospect was appalling.

"One kick in the stummick would settle a chap like me," said Mr. Polly.

"Oh, God!" cried Mr. Polly, and lifted his eyes to heaven, and said for the last time in that struggle, "It isn't my affair!"

And so saying, he turned his face towards the Potwell Inn.

He went back, neither halting nor hastening in his pace after this last decision, but with a mind feverishly busy.

"If I get killed I get killed, and if he gets killed I get hung. Don't seem just somehow."

"Don't suppose I shall frighten him off."

The private war between Mr. Polly and Uncle Jim for the possession of the Potwell Inn fell naturally into three chief campaigns. There was, first of all, the great campaign which ended in the triumphant eviction of Uncle Jim from the inn premises; there came next, after a brief interval, the futile invasions of the premises by Uncle Jim that culminated in the Battle of the Dead Eel; and, after some months of involuntary truce, there was the last supreme conflict of the Night Surprise. Each of these campaigns merits a section to itself.

Mr. Polly re-entered the inn discreetly.

He found the plump woman seated in her bar, her eyes
astare, her face white and wet with tears. "O God!" she was saying over and over again—"O God!" The air was full of a spirituous reek, and on the sanded boards in front of the bar were the fragments of a broken bottle, and an overturned glass.

She turned her despair at the sound of his entry, and despair gave place to astonishment.

"You come back!" she said.
"R-ather," said Mr. Polly.
"He's—he's mad drunk and looking for her."
"Where is she?"
"Locked upstairs."
"Haven't you sent to the police?"
"No one to send."
"I'll see to it," said Mr. Polly. "Out this way?"

She nodded.

He went to the crinkly paneled window and peered out. Uncle Jim was coming down the garden path towards the house, his hands in his pockets, and singing hoarsely. Mr. Polly remembered afterwards, with pride and amazement, that he felt neither faint nor rigid. He glanced round him, seized a bottle of beer by the neck as an improvised club, and went out by the garden door. Uncle Jim stopped, amazed. His brain did not instantly rise to the new posture of things. "You!" he cried, and stopped for a moment. "You— "

"Your job," said Mr. Polly, and advanced some paces.

Uncle Jim stood swaying with wrathful astonishment, and then darted forward with clutching hands. Mr. Polly felt that if his antagonist closed, he was lost, and smote with all his force at the ugly head before him. Smash went the bottle, and Uncle Jim staggered, half stunned by the blow, and blinded with beer.

The lapses and leaps of the human mind are for ever mysterious. Mr. Polly had never expected that bottle to break. In an instant he felt disarmed and helpless. Before him was Uncle Jim, infuriated and evidently still coming on, and for defence was nothing but the neck of a bottle.

For a time our Mr. Polly has figured heroic. Now comes the fall again; he sounded abject terror; he dropped that ineffectual scrap of glass and turned and fled round the corner of the house.
"Bolls!" came the thick voice of the enemy behind him, as one who accepts a challenge, and bleeding but indomitable, Uncle Jim entered the house.

"Bolls!" he said, surveying the bar. "Fightin' with bolls! I'll show 'im fightin' with bolls!"

Uncle Jim had learnt all about fighting with bottles in the Reformatory Home. Regardless of his terror-stricken aunt, he ranged among the bottled beer and succeeded, after one or two failures, in preparing two bottles to his satisfaction by knocking off the bottom, and gripping them dagger-wise by the necks. So prepared, he went forth again to destroy Mr. Polly.

Mr. Polly, freed from the sense of urgent pursuit, had halted beyond the raspberry canes, and rallied his courage. The sense of Uncle Jim victorious in the house restored his manhood. He went round by the outhouses to the riverside, seeking a weapon, and found an old paddle boat-hook. With this he smote Uncle Jim as he emerged by the door of the tap, Uncle Jim, blaspheming dreadfully, and with dire stabbing intimations in either hand, came through the splintering paddle like a circus rider through a paper hoop, and once more Mr. Polly dropped his weapon and fled.

A careless observer, watching him sprint round and round the inn in front of the lumbering and reproachful pursuit of Uncle Jim, might have formed an altogether erroneous estimate of the issue of the campaign. Certain compensating qualities of the very greatest military value were appearing in Mr. Polly, even as he ran; if Uncle Jim had strength and brute courage, and the rich toughening experience a Reformatory Home affords, Mr. Polly was nevertheless sober, more mobile, and with a mind now stimulated to an almost incredible nimbleness. So that he not only gained on Uncle Jim, but thought what use he might make of this advantage. The word "strategious" flamed red across the tumult of his mind. As he came round the house for the third time, he darted suddenly into the yard, swung the door to behind himself, and bolted it, seized the zinc pig's pail that stood by the entrance to the kitchen, and had it neatly and resonantly over Uncle Jim's head, as he came belatedly in round the outhouse on the other side. One of the splintered bottles jabbed Mr. Polly's ear—at the time it seemed of no importance—and then Uncle Jim was
down and writhing dangerously and noisily upon the yard tiles, with his head still in the pig pail, and his bottle gone to splinters, and Mr. Polly was fastening the kitchen door against him.

"Can't go on like this for ever," said Mr. Polly, whooping for breath, and selecting a weapon from among the brooms that stood behind the kitchen door.

Uncle Jim was losing his head. He was up and kicking the door, and bellowing unamiable proposals and invitations, so that a strategist emerging silently by the tap door could locate him without difficulty, steal upon him unawares, and——!

But before that felling blow could be delivered, Uncle Jim's ear had caught a footfall, and he turned. Mr. Polly quailed, and lowered his broom—a fatal hesitation.

"Now I got you!" cried Uncle Jim, dancing forward in a disconcerting zigzag.

He rushed too close, and Mr. Polly stopped him feartly, as it were a miracle, with the head of the broom across his chest. Uncle Jim seized the broom with both hands. "Lea go," he said, and tugged. Mr. Polly shook his head, tugged, and showed pale, compressed lips. Both tugged. Then Uncle Jim tried to get round the end of the broom; Mr. Polly circled away. They began to circle about one another, both lugging hard, both intensely watchful of the slightest initiative on the part of the other. Mr. Polly wished brooms were longer—twelve or thirteen feet, for example; Uncle Jim was clearly for shortness in brooms. He wasted breath in saying what was to happen shortly—sanguinary, oriental, soul-blenching things—when the broom no longer separated them. Mr. Polly thought he had never seen an uglier person. Suddenly Uncle Jim flashed into violent activity, but alcohol slows movement, and Mr. Polly was equal to him. Then Uncle Jim tried jerks, and, for a terrible instant, seemed to have the room out of Mr. Polly's hands. But Mr. Polly recovered it with the clutch of a drowning man. Then Uncle Jim drove suddenly at Mr. Polly's midriff; but again Mr. Polly was ready, and swept him round in a circle. Then suddenly a wild hope filled Mr. Polly. He saw the river was very near, the post to which the punt was tied not three yards away. With a wild yell he sent the broom home under his antagonist's ribs. "Wooosh!" he cried, as the resistance gave.
"Oh! Gaw!" said Uncle Jim, going backward helplessly, and Mr. Polly thrust hard, and abandoned the broom to the enemy's despairing clutch.

Splash! Uncle Jim was in the water, and Mr. Polly had leapt like a cat aboard the ferry punt, and grasped the pole.

Up came Uncle Jim spluttering and dripping. "You (unprofitable matter, and printing it might lead to a Censorship of Novels)—You know I got a weak chess!"

The pole took him in the throat and drove him backward and downwards.

"Lea go!" cried Uncle Jim, staggering, and with real terror in his once awful eyes.

Splash! Down he fell backwards into a frothing mass of water, with Mr. Polly jabbing at him. Under water he turned round, and came up again, as if in flight towards the middle of the river. Directly his head appeared, Mr. Polly had him between his shoulders and under again, bubbling thickly. A hand clutched and disappeared.

It was stupendous! Mr. Polly had discovered the heel of Achilles. Uncle Jim had no stomach for cold water. The broom floated away, pitching gently on the swell. Mr. Polly, infuriated by victory, thrust Uncle Jim under again, and drove the punt round on its chain, in such a manner, that when Uncle Jim came up for the fourth time—and now he was nearly out of his depth, too buoyed up to walk, and apparently nearly helpless—Mr. Polly, fortunately for them both, could not reach him.

Uncle Jim made the clumsy gestures of those who struggle insecurely in the water. "Keep out," said Mr. Polly. Uncle Jim, with a great effort, got a footing, emerged until his armpits were out of water, until his waistcoat buttons showed, one by one, till scarcely two remained, and made for the camp-sheeting.

"Keep out!" cried Mr. Polly, and leapt off the punt and followed the movements of his victim along the shore.

"I tell you I got a weak chess," said Uncle Jim moistly. "I ate worter. This ain't fair fightin'."

"Keep out!" said Mr. Polly.

"This ain't fair fightin'," said Uncle Jim, almost weeping, and all his terrors had gone.

"Keep out!" said Mr. Polly, with an accurately poised pole.
“I tell you I got to land, you Fool,” said Uncle Jim, with a sort of despairing wrathfulness, and began moving down-stream.

“You keep out,” said Mr. Polly in parallel movement. “Don’t you ever land on this place again! . . .”

Slowly, argumentatively, and reluctantly, Uncle Jim waded down-stream. He tried threats, he tried persuasion, he even tried a belated note of pathos; Mr. Polly remained inexorable, if in secret a little perplexed as to the outcome of the situation. “This cold’s getting to my marrer!” said Uncle Jim.

“You want cooling. You keep out in it,” said Mr. Polly.

They came round the bend into sight of Nicholson’s ait, where the backwater runs down to the Potwell Mill. And there, after much parley and several feints, Uncle Jim made a desperate effort, and struggled into clutch of the overhanging osiers on the island, and so got out of the water, with the mill-stream between them. He emerged dripping and muddy and vindictive. “By Gaw!” he said. “I’ll skin you for this!”

“You keep off, or I’ll do worse to you,” said Mr. Polly.

The spirit was out of Uncle Jim for the time, and he turned away to struggle through the osiers towards the mill, leaving a shining trail of water among the green-grey stems.

Mr. Polly returned slowly and thoughtfully to the inn, and suddenly his mind began to bubble with phrases. The plump woman stood at the top of the steps that led up to the inn door, to greet him.

“Law!” she cried, as he drew near, “’asn’t ’e killed you?”

“Do I look it?” said Mr. Polly.

“But where’s Jim?”

“Gone off.”

“’E was mad drunk and dangerous!”

“I put him in the river,” said Mr. Polly. “That toned down his alcolaceous frenzy! I gave him a bit of a doing altogether.”

“Hain’t he ’urt you?”

“Not a bit of it!”

“Then what’s all that blood beside your ear?”

Mr. Polly felt. “Quite a cut! Funny how one overlooks things! Heated moments! He must have done
that when he jabbed about with those bottles. Hallo, Kiddy! You venturing downstairs again?"

"Ain’t he killed you?" asked the little girl.

"Well!"

"I wish I’d seen more of the fighting."

"Didn’t you?"

"All I saw was you running round the house, and Uncle Jim after you."

There was a little pause. "I was leading him on," said Mr. Polly.

"Some one’s shouting at the ferry," she said.

"Right-o. But you won’t see any more of Uncle Jim for a bit. We’ve been having a conversazione about that."

"I believe it is Uncle Jim," said the little girl.

"Then he can wait," said Mr. Polly shortly.

He turned round and listened for the words that drifted across from the little figure on the opposite bank. So far as he could judge, Uncle Jim was making an appointment for the morrow. Mr. Polly replied with a defiant movement of the punt pole. The little figure was convulsed for a moment, and then went on its way upstream—fiercely.

So it was the first campaign ended in an insecure victory.

The next day was Wednesday, and a slack day for the Potwell Inn. It was a hot, close day, full of the murmuring of bees. One or two people crossed by the ferry; an elaborately-equipped fisherman stopped for cold meat and dry ginger ale in the bar parlour; some haymakers came and drank beer for an hour, and afterwards sent jars and jugs by a boy to be replenished; that was all. Mr. Polly had risen early, and was busy about the place meditating upon the probable tactics of Uncle Jim. He was no longer strung up to the desperate pitch of the first encounter. He was grave and anxious. Uncle Jim had shrunk, as all antagonists that are boldly faced shrink, after the first battle, to the negotiable, the vulnerable. Formidable he was, no doubt, but not invincible. He had, under Providence, been defeated once, and he might be defeated altogether.
Mr. Polly went about the place considering the militant possibilities of pacific things—pokers, copper-sticks, garden implements, kitchen knives, garden nets, barbed wire, oars, clothes’-lines, blankets, pewter pots, stockings, and broken bottles. He prepared a club with a stocking and a bottle inside, upon the best East End model. He swung it round his head once, broke an outhouse window with a flying fragment of glass, and ruined the stocking beyond all mending. He developed a subtle scheme, with the cellar flap as a sort of pitfall; but he rejected it finally because (a) it might entrap the plump woman, and (b) he had no use whatever for Uncle Jim in the cellar. He determined to wire the garden that evening, burglar fashion, against the possibilities of a night attack.

Towards two o’clock in the afternoon three young men arrived in a capacious boat from the direction of Lammam, and asked permission to camp in the paddock. It was given all the more readily by Mr. Polly because he perceived in their proximity a possible check upon the self-expression of Uncle Jim. But he did not foresee, and no one could have foreseen, that Uncle Jim, stealing craftily upon the Potwell Inn in the late afternoon, armed with a large rough-hewn stake, would have mistaken the bending form of one of those campers—who was pulling a few onions by permission in the garden—for Mr. Polly’s, and crept upon it swiftly and silently, and smitten its wide invitation unforgettably and unforgivably. It was an error impossible to explain; the resounding whack went up to heaven, the cry of amazement, and Mr. Polly emerged from the inn, armed with the frying-pan he was cleaning, to take this reckless assailant in the rear. Uncle Jim, realizing his error, fled blaspheming into the arms of the other two campers, who were returning from the village with butcher’s meat and groceries. They caught him, they smacked his face with steak and punched him with a bursting parcel of lump sugar, they held him, though he bit them, and their idea of punishment was to duck him. They were hilarious, strong young stockbrokers’ clerks, Territorials, and seasoned boating men; they ducked him as though it was romping and all that Mr. Polly had to do was to pick up lumps of sugar for them and wipe them on his sleeve and put them on a plate, and explain that Uncle Jim was a notorious bad character, and not quite right in his head.
“Got a regular Obsession the Missis is his aunt,” said Mr. Polly, expanding it. “Perfect noosance he is.”

But he caught a glance of Uncle Jim’s eye as he receded before the campers’ urgency that boded ill for him, and in the night he had a disagreeable idea that perhaps his luck might not hold for the third occasion.

That came soon enough. So soon, indeed, as the campers had gone.

Thursday was the early closing day at Lammam, and, next to Sunday, the busiest part of the week at the Potwell Inn. Sometimes as many as six boats all at once would be moored against the ferry punt, and hiring row-boats. People could either have a complete tea, a complete tea with jam, cake, and eggs, a kettle of boiling water and find the rest, or Refreshments à la carte as they chose. They sat about, but usually the boiling water-ers had a delicacy about using the tables, and grouped themselves humbly on the ground. The complete tea-ers with jam and eggs got the best tablecloth, on the table nearest the steps that led up to the glass-panelled door.

The groups about the lawn were very satisfying to Mr. Polly’s sense of amenity. To the right were the complete tea-ers, with everything heart could desire; then a small group of three young men in remarkable green and violet and pale blue shirts, and two girls in mauve and yellow blouses, with common teas and gooseberry jam, at the green clothless table; then, on the grass down by the pollard willow, a small family of hot-water-ers with a hamper, a little troubled by wasps in their jam from the nest in the tree, and all in mourning, but happy otherwise; and on the lawn to the right a ginger beer lot of ’prentices without their collars, and very jocular and happy. The young people in the rainbow shirts and blouses formed the centre of interest; they were under the leadership of a gold-spectacled senior with a fluting voice and an air of mystery; he ordered everything, and showed a peculiar knowledge of the qualities of the Potwell jams, preferring gooseberry with much insistence. Mr. Polly watched him, christened him the “benifuous influence,” glanced at the ’prentices, and went inside and down into the cellar in order to replenish the stock of stone ginger beer, which the plump woman had allowed to run low during the preoccupations of the campaign. It was in the
cellar that he first became aware of the return of Uncle Jim. He became aware of him as a voice, a voice not only hoarse but thick, as voices thicken under the influence of alcohol.

"Where's that muddy-faced mongrel?" cried Uncle Jim. "Let 'im come out to me! Where's that blighted wisp with the punt pole—I got a word to say to 'im. Come out of it, you pot-bellied chunk of dirtiness, you! Come out and 'ave your ugly face wiped. I got a Thing for you . . . 'Ear me?"

"'E's 'iding, that's what 'e's doing," said the voice of Uncle Jim, dropping for a moment to sorrow, and then with a great increment of wrathfulness: "Come out of my nest, you blinking cuckoo, you, or I'll cut your silly insides out! Come out of it, you pockmarked Rat! Stealing another man's 'ome away from 'im! Come out and look me in the face, you squinting son of a Skunk! . . ."

Mr. Polly took the ginger beer and went thoughtfully upstairs to the bar.

"'E's back," said the plump woman as he appeared. "I knew 'e'd come back."

"I heard him," said Mr. Polly, and looked about. "Just gimme the old poker handle that's under the beer-engine."

The door opened softly, and Mr. Polly turned quickly. But it was only the pointed nose and intelligent face of the young man with the gilt spectacles and the discreet manner. He coughed, and the spectacles fixed Mr. Polly.

"I say," he said with quiet earnestness, "there's a chap out here seems to want some one."

"Why don't he come in?" said Mr. Polly.

"He seems to want you out there."

"What's he want?"

"I think," said the spectacled young man, after a thoughtful moment, "he appears to have brought you a present of fish."

"Isn't he shouting?"

"He is a little boisterous."

"He'd better come in."

The manner of the spectacled young man intensified. "I wish you'd come out and persuade him to go away," he said. "His language—isn't quite the thing—ladies."

"It never was," said the plump woman, her voice charged with sorrow.

Mr. Polly moved towards the door and stood with his
hand on the handle. The gold-spectacled face disappeared:

"Now, my man," came his voice from outside, "be careful what you're saying——"

"Oo in all the World and Hereafter are you to call me me man?" cried Uncle Jim, in the voice of one astonished and pained beyond endurance, and added scornfully, "You gold-eyed Geezer, you!"

"Tut, tut!" said the gentleman in gilt glasses. "Restrain yourself!"

Mr. Polly emerged, poker in hand, just in time to see what followed. Uncle Jim in his shirt-sleeves, and a state of ferocious decolletage, was holding something—yes!—a dead eel by means of a piece of newspaper about its tail, holding it down and back and a little sideways in such a way as to smite with it upward and hard. It struck the spectacled gentleman under the jaw with a peculiar dead thud, and a cry of horror came from the two seated parties at the sight. One of the girls shrieked piercingly, "Horace!" and everyone sprang up. The sense of helping numbers came to Mr. Polly's aid.

"Drop it!" he cried, and came down the steps waving his poker and thrusting the spectacled gentleman before him, as heretofore great heroes were wont to wield the ox-hide shield.

Uncle Jim gave ground suddenly, and trod upon the foot of a young man in a blue shirt, who immediately thrust at him violently with both hands.

"Lea go!" howled Uncle Jim. "That's the chap I'm looking for!" and pressing the head of the spectacled gentleman aside, smote hard at Mr. Polly.

But the sight of this indignity inflicted upon the spectacled gentleman a woman's heart was stirred, a pink parasol drove hard and true at Uncle Jim's wiry neck, and at the same moment the young man in the blue shirt sought to collar him, and lost his grip again.

"Suffragettes!" gasped Uncle Jim, with the ferrule at his throat. "Everywhere!" and aimed a second more successful blow at Mr. Polly.

"Wup!" said Mr. Polly.

But now the jam and egg party was joining in the fray. A stout, yet still fairly able-bodied gentleman in white and black checks inquired: "What's the fellow up to? Ain't there no
police here?" And it was evident that once more public opinion was rallying to the support of Mr. Polly.

"Oh, come on then, all the lot of you!" cried Uncle Jim, and backing dexterously, whirled the eel round in a destructive circle. The pink sunshade was torn from the hand that gripped it, and whirled athwart the complete but unadorned tea-things on the green table.

"Collar him! Someone get hold of his collar!" cried the gold-spectacled gentleman, retreating up the steps of the inn door as if to rally his forces.

"Stand clear, you blessed mantel ornaments!" cried Uncle Jim. "Stand clear!" and retired backing, staving off attack by means of the whirling eel.

Mr. Polly, undeterred by a sense of grave damage done to his nose, pressed the attack in front, the two young men in violet and blue skirmished on Uncle Jim's flanks, the man in white and black checks sought still further outflanking possibilities, and two of the apprentice boys ran for oars. The gold-spectacled gentleman, as if inspired, came down the wooden steps again, seized the tablecloth of the jam and egg party, lugged it from under the crockery with inadequate precautions against breakage, and advanced with compressed lips, curious lateral crouching movements, swift flashings of his glasses, and a general suggestion of bull-fighting in his pose and gestures. Uncle Jim was kept busy, and unable to plan his retreat with any strategic soundness. He was, moreover, manifestly a little nervous about the river in his rear. He gave ground in a curve, and so came right across the rapidly abandoned camp of the family in mourning, crunching teacups under his heel, oversetting the teapot, and finally tripping backwards over the hamper. The eel flew out at a tangent from his hand, and became a mere looping relic on the sward.

"Hold him!" cried the gentleman in spectacles. "Collar him!" and, moving forward with extraordinary promptitude, wrapped the best tablecloth about Uncle Jim's arms and head. Mr. Polly grasped his purpose instantly, the man in checks was scarcely slower, and in another moment Uncle Jim was no more than a bundle of smothered blasphemy, and a pair of wildly active legs.

"Duck him!" panted Mr. Polly, holding on to the earthquake. "Bes' thing—duck him."
The bundle was convulsed by paroxysms of anger and protest. One boot got the hamper and sent it ten yards.

"Go in the house for a clothes'-line, someone," said the gentleman in gold spectacles. "He'll get out of this in a moment."

One of the apprentices ran.

"Bird-nets in the garden," shouted Mr. Polly. "In the garden."

The apprentice was divided in his purpose.

And then suddenly Uncle Jim collapsed, and became a limp, dead-seeming thing under their hands. His arms were drawn inward, his legs bent up under his person, and so he lay.

"Fainted!" said the man in checks, relaxing his grip.

"A fit, perhaps," said the man in spectacles.

"Keep hold!" said Mr. Polly, too late.

For suddenly Uncle Jim's arms and legs flew out like springs released. Mr. Polly was tumbled backwards, and fell over the broken teapot, and into the arms of the father in mourning. Something struck his head—dazzingly. In another second Uncle Jim was on his feet, and the tablecloth enshrouded the head of the man in checks. Uncle Jim manifestly considered he had done all that honour required of him; and against overwhelming numbers, and the possibility of reiterated duckings, flight is no disgrace.

Uncle Jim fled.

Mr. Polly sat up, after an interval of indeterminate length, among the ruins of an idyllic afternoon. Quite a lot of things seemed scattered and broken, but it was difficult to grasp it all at once. He stared between the legs of people. He became aware of a voice speaking slowly and complainingly.

"Someone ought to pay for those tea-things," said the father in mourning. "We didn't bring them 'ere to be danced on, not by no manner of means."

There followed an anxious peace for three days, and then a rough man in a blue jersey, in the intervals of trying to choke himself with bread and cheese and pickled onions, broke abruptly into information.
"Jim's lagged again, Missus," he said.
"What?" said the landlady. "Our Jim?"
"Your Jim," said the man; and after an absolutely necessary pause for swallowing, added, "Stealing a 'atchet."
He did not speak for some moments, and then he replied to Mr. Polly's inquiries: "Yes, a 'atchet. Down Lammam way—night before last."
"What'd 'e steal a 'atchet for?" asked the plump woman.
"'E said 'e wanted a 'atchet."
"I wonder what he wanted a hatchet for," said Mr. Polly thoughtfully.
"I dessay 'e 'ad a use for it," said the gentleman in the blue jersey, and he took a mouthful that amounted to conversational suicide. There was a prolonged pause in the little bar, and Mr. Polly did some rapid thinking.
He went to the window and whistled. "I shall stick it," he whispered at last, "'atchets or no 'atchets."
He turned to the man with the blue jersey, when he thought him clear for speech again. "How much did you say they'd given him?" he asked.
"Three munce," said the man in the blue jersey, and refilled anxiously, as if alarmed at the momentary clearness of his voice.

Those three months passed all too quickly—months of sunshine and warmth, of varied novel exertion in the open air, of congenial experiences, of interest and wholesome food and successful digestion; months that browned Mr. Polly and hardened him, and saw the beginnings of his beard! months marred only by one anxiety, an anxiety Mr. Polly did his utmost to suppress. The day of reckoning was never mentioned, it is true, by either the plump woman or himself, but the name of Uncle Jim was written in letters of glaring silence across their intercourse. As the term of that respite drew to an end, his anxiety increased, until at last it trenched upon his well-earned sleep. He had some idea of buying a revolver. He compromised upon a small and very foul and dirty rook-rifle, which he purchased in Lammam under a pretext of bird scaring, and loaded carefully and concealed under his bed from the plump woman's eye.
September passed away, October came.
And at last came that night in October whose happenings it is so difficult for a sympathetic historian to drag out of their proper nocturnal indistinctness into the clear, hard light of positive statement. A novelist should present characters, not vivisect them publicly.

The best, the kindliest, if not the justest course, is surely to leave untold such things as Mr. Polly would manifestly have preferred untold.

Mr. Polly has declared that when the cyclist discovered him he was seeking a weapon that should make a conclusive end to Uncle Jim. That declaration is placed before the reader without comment.

The gun was certainly in the possession of Uncle Jim at that time, and no human being but Mr. Polly knows how he got hold of it.

The cyclist was a literary man named Warspite, who suffered from insomnia; he had risen and come out of his house near Lammam just before the dawn, and he discovered Mr. Polly partially concealed in the ditch by the Potwell churchyard wall. It is an ordinary dry ditch full of nettles, and overgrown with elder and dog-rose, and in no way suggestive of an arsenal. It is the last place in which a sensible man would look for a gun. And he says that when he dismounted to see why Mr. Polly was allowing only the latter part of his person to show (and that, it would seem, by inadvertency), Mr. Polly merely raised his head and advised him to “Look out!” and added, “He’s let fly at me twice already.”

He came out under persuasion, and with gestures of extreme caution. He was wearing a white cotton nightgown of the type that has now been so extensively superseded by pyjama sleeping suits, and his legs and feet were bare, and much scratched and torn, and very muddy.

Mr. Warspite takes that exceptionally lively interest in his fellow-creatures which constitutes so much of the distinctive and complex charm of your novelist all the world over, and he at once involved himself generously in the case. The two men returned at Mr. Polly’s initiative across the churchyard to the Potwell Inn, and came upon the burst and damaged rook rifle near the new monument to Sir Samuel Harpon at the corner by the yew.
"That must have been his third go," said Mr. Polly. "It sounded a bit funny."

The sight inspired him greatly, and he explained further that he had fled to the churchyard on account of the cover afforded by tombstones from the flight of small shot. He expressed anxiety for the fate of the landlady of the Potwell Inn and her grandchild, and led the way with enhanced alacrity along the lane to that establishment.

They found the doors of the house standing open, the bar in some disorder—several bottles of whisky were afterwards found to be missing—and Blake, the village policeman, rapping patiently at the open door. He entered with them. The glass in the bar had suffered severely, and one of the mirrors was starred from a blow from a pewter pot. The till had been forced and ransacked, and so had the bureau in the minute room behind the bar.

An upper window was opened, and the voice of the landlady became audible making inquiries. They went out and parleyed with her. She had locked herself upstairs with the little girl, she said, and refused to descend until she was assured that neither Uncle Jim nor Mr. Polly's gun was anywhere on the premises. Mr. Blake and Mr. Warspite proceeded to satisfy themselves with regard to the former condition, and Mr. Polly went to his room in search of garments more suited to the brightening dawn. He returned immediately with a request that Blake and Mr. Warspite would "just come and look." They found the apartment in a state of extraordinary confusion, the bed-clothes in a ball in the corner, the drawers all open and ransacked, the chair broken, the lock of the door forced and broken, one door panel slightly scorched and perforated by shot, and the window wide open. None of Mr. Polly's clothes were to be seen, but some garments which had apparently once formed part of a stoker's workaday outfit, two brownish-yellow halves of a shirt, and an unsound pair of boots, were scattered on the floor. A faint smell of gunpowder still hung in the air, and two or three books Mr. Polly had recently acquired had been shied with some violence under the bed. Mr. Warspite looked at Mr. Blake, and then both men looked at Mr. Polly. "That's his boots," said Mr. Polly.

Blake turned his eyes to the window. "Some of these tiles have just got broken," he observed.
"I got out of the window and slid down the scullery tiles," Mr. Polly answered, omitting much, they both felt, from his explanation.

"Well, we better find 'im and 'ave a word with 'im," said Blake. "That's about my business now."

But Uncle Jim had gone altogether.

He did not return for some days. That, perhaps, was not very wonderful. But the days lengthened to weeks, and the weeks to months, and still Uncle Jim did not recur. A year passed, and the anxiety of him became less acute; a second healing year followed the first. One afternoon about thirty months after the Night Surprise the plump woman spoke of him.

"I wonder what's become of Jim," she said.

"I wonder sometimes," said Mr. Polly.

One summer afternoon, about five years after his first coming to the Potwell Inn, Mr. Polly found himself sitting under the pollard willow, fishing for dace. It was a plumper, browner, and healthier Mr. Polly altogether than the miserable bankrupt with whose dyspeptic portrait our novel opened. He was fat, but with a fatness more generally diffused, and the lower part of his face was touched to gravity by a small, square beard. Also he was balder.

It was the first time he had found leisure to fish, though from the very outset of his Potwell career he had promised himself abundant indulgence in the pleasures of fishing. Fishing, as the golden page of English literature testifies, is a meditative and retrospective pursuit, and the varied page of memory, disregarded so long for sake of the teeming duties I have already enumerated, began to unfold itself to Mr. Polly's consideration. A speculation about Uncle Jim died for want of material, and gave place to a reckoning of the years and months that had passed since his coming to Potwell, and that to a philosophical review of his life. He began to
think about Miriam, remotely and impersonally. He remembered many things that had been neglected by his conscience during the busier times, as, for example, that he had committed arson and deserted a wife. For the first time he looked at these long-neglected facts in the face.

It is disagreeable to think one has committed arson, because it is an action that leads to jail. Otherwise I do not think there was a grain of regret for that in Mr. Polly's composition. But deserting Miriam was in a different category. Deserting Miriam was mean.

This is a history, and not a glorification of Mr. Polly, and I tell of things as they were with him. Apart from the disagreeable twinge arising from the thought of what might happen if he was found out, he had not the slightest remorse about that fire. Arson, after all, is an artificial crime. Some crimes are crimes in themselves, would be crimes without any law, the cruelties, mockery, the breaches of faith that astonish and wound, but the burning of things is in itself neither good nor bad. A large number of houses deserve to be burnt, most modern furniture, an overwhelming majority of pictures and books—one might go on for some time with the list. If our community was collectively anything more than a feeble idiot, it would burn most of London and Chicago, for example, and build sane and beautiful cities in the place of these pestilential heaps of rotten private property. I have failed in presenting Mr. Polly altogether if I have not made you see that he was in many respects an artless child of Nature, far more untrained, undisciplined, and spontaneous than an ordinary savage. And he was really glad, for all that little drawback of fear, that he had had the courage to set fire to his house, and fly, and come to the Potwell Inn.

But he was not glad he had left Miriam. He had seen Miriam cry once or twice in his life, and it had always reduced him to abject commiseration. He now imagined her crying. He perceived in a perplexed way that he had made himself responsible for her life. He forgot how she had spoilt his own. He had hitherto rested in the faith that she had over a hundred pounds of insurance money, but now, with his eye meditatively upon his float, he realized a hundred pounds does not last for ever. His conviction of her incompetence was unflinching; she was bound to have fooled it away somehow by this time. And then!
He saw her humping her shoulders, and sniffing in a manner he had always regarded as detestable at close quarters, but which now became harrowingly pitiful.

"Damn!" said Mr. Polly, and down went his float, and he flicked a victim to destruction, and took it off the hook.

He compared his own comfort and health with Miriam's imagined distress.

"Ought to have done something for herself," said Mr. Polly, re-baiting his hook. "She was always talking of doing things. Why couldn't she?"

He watched the float oscillating gently towards quiescence.

"Silly to begin thinking about her," he said. "Damn silly!"

But once he had begun thinking about her, he had to go on.

"Oh, blow!" cried Mr. Polly presently, and pulled up his hook, to find another fish had just snatched at it in the last instant. His handling must have made the poor thing feel itself unwelcome.

He gathered his things together and turned towards the house.

All the Potwell Inn betrayed his influence now, for here, indeed, he had found his place in the world. It looked brighter, so bright, indeed, as to be almost skittish, with the white and green paint he had lavished upon it. Even the garden palings were striped white and green, and so were the boats; for Mr. Polly was one of those who find a positive sensuous pleasure in the laying on of paint. Left and right were two large boards, which had done much to enhance the inn's popularity with the lighter-minded variety of pleasure-seekers. Both marked innovations. One bore in large letters the single word "Museum," the other was as plain and laconic with "Omlets." The spelling of the latter word was Mr. Polly's own; but when he had seen a whole boatload of men, intent on Lammam for lunch, stop open-mouthed, and stare, and grin, and come in and ask in a marked sarcastic manner for "omlets," he perceived that his inaccuracy had done more for the place than his utmost cunning could have contrived. In a year or so the inn was known both up and down the river by its new name of "Omlets," and Mr. Polly, after some secret irritation, smiled,
'and was content. And the fat woman's omelettes were things to remember.

(You will note I have changed her epithet. Time works upon us all.)

She stood upon the steps as he came towards the house, and smiled at him richly.

"Caught many?" she asked.

"Got an idea," said Mr. Polly. "Would it put you out very much if I went off for a day or two for a bit of a holiday? There won't be much doing now until Thursday."

Feeling recklessly secure behind his beard, Mr. Polly surveyed the Fishbourne High Street once again. The north side was much as he had known it, except that the name of Rusper had vanished. A row of new shops replaced the destruction of the great fire. Mantell and Throbsons' had risen again upon a more flamboyant pattern, and the new fire station was in the Swiss Teutonic style, with much red paint; next door, in the place of Rumbold's, was a branch of the Colonial Tea Company, and then a Salmon and Gluckstein Tobacco Shop, and then a little shop that displayed sweets, and professed a "Tea Room Upstairs." He considered this as a possible place in which to prosecute inquiries about his lost wife, wavering a little between it and the God's Providence Inn down the street. Then his eye caught the name over the window. "Polly," he read, "& Larkins! Well, I'm—astonished!"

A momentary faintness came upon him. He walked past, and down the street, returned, and surveyed the shop again.

He saw a middle-aged, rather untidy woman standing behind the counter, who for an instant he thought might be Miriam terribly changed, and then recognized as his sister-in-law Annie, filled out, and no longer hilarious. She stared at him without a sign of recognition as he entered the shop.

"Can I have tea?" said Mr. Polly.

"Well," said Annie, "you can. But our Tea Room's upstairs... My sister's been cleaning it out—and it's a bit upset."
"It would be," said Mr. Polly softly.
"I beg your pardon?" said Annie.
"I said I didn’t mind. Up here?"
"I dare say there’ll be a table," said Annie, and followed him up to a room whose conscientious disorder was intensely reminiscent of Miriam.

"Nothing like turning everything upside down when you’re cleaning," said Mr. Polly cheerfully.
"It’s my sister’s way," said Annie impartially. "She’s gone out for a bit of air, but I dare say she’ll be back soon to finish. It’s a nice light room when it’s tidy. Can I put you a table over there?"

"Let me," said Mr. Polly, and assisted.
He sat down by the open window and drummed on the table and meditated on his next step, while Annie vanished to get his tea. After all, things didn’t seem so bad with Miriam. He tried over several gambits in imagination.
"Unusual name," he said, as Annie laid a cloth before him.
Annie looked interrogation.
"Polly. Polly and Larkins. Real, I suppose?"
"Polly’s my sister’s name. She married a Mr. Polly."
"Widow, I presume?" said Mr. Polly.
"Yes. This five years—come October."
"Lord!" said Mr. Polly, in unfeigned surprise.
"Found drowned he was. There was a lot of talk in the place."
"Never heard of it," said Mr. Polly. "I’m a stranger—rather."
"In the Medway near Maidstone it was. He must have been in the water for days. Wouldn’t have known him, my sister wouldn’t, if it hadn’t been for the name sewn in his clothes. All whitey and eat away he was."
"Bless my heart! Must have been rather a shock for her."
"It was a shock," said Annie, and added darkly, "But sometimes a shock’s better than a long agony."
"No doubt," said Mr. Polly.
He gazed with a rapt expression at the preparations before him. "So I’m drowned," something was saying inside him. "Life insured?" he asked.
"We started the tea-rooms with it," said Annie.
Why, if things were like this, had remorse and anxiety for Miriam been implanted in his soul? No shadow of an answer appeared.

"Marriage is a lottery," said Mr. Polly.

"She found it so," said Annie. "Would you like some jam?"

"I'd like an egg," said Mr. Polly. "I'll have two. I've got a sort of feeling—As though I wanted keeping up.

... Wasn't particularly good sort, this Mr. Polly?"

"He was a wearing husband," said Annie. "I've often pitied my sister. He was one of that sort——"

"Dissolute?" suggested Mr. Polly faintly.

"No," said Annie judiciously, "not exactly dissolute. Feeble's more the word. Weak, 'e was. Weak as water. 'Ow long do you like your eggs boiled?"

"Four minutes exactly," said Mr. Polly.

"One gets talking," said Annie.

"One does," said Mr. Polly, and she left him to his thoughts.

What perplexed him was his recent remorse and tenderness for Miriam. Now he was back in her atmosphere, all that had vanished, and the old feeling of helpless antagonism returned. He surveyed the piled furniture, the economically managed carpet, the unpleasant pictures on the wall. Why had he felt remorse? Why had he entertained this illusion of a helpless woman crying aloud in the pitiless darkness for him? He peered into the unfathomable mysteries of the heart, and ducked back to a smaller issue. Was he feeble? Hang it! He'd known feebler people by far!

The eggs came up. Nothing in Annie's manner invited a resumption of the discussion.

"Business brisk?" he ventured to ask.

Annie reflected. "It is," she said, "and it isn't. It's like that."

"Ah!" said Mr. Polly and squared himself to his egg.

"Was there an inquest on that chap?"

"What chap?"

"What was his name?—Polly!"

"Of course."

"You're sure it was him?"

"What do you mean?"

Annie looked at him hard, and suddenly his soul was black with terror.
"Who else could it have been—in the very clothes he wore?"

"Of course," said Mr. Polly, and began his egg. He was so agitated that he only realized its condition when he was half-way through it, and Annie safely downstairs.

"Lord!" he said, reaching out hastily for the pepper.

"One of Miriam's! Management! I haven't tasted such an egg for five years... Wonder where she gets them! Picks them out, I suppose."

He abandoned it for its fellow.

Except for a slight mustiness, the second egg was very palatable indeed. He was getting to the bottom of it as Miriam came in. He looked up. "Nice afternoon," he said, at her stare, and perceived she knew him at once by the gesture and the voice. She went white, and shut the door behind her. She looked as though she was going to faint. Mr. Polly sprang up quickly, and handed her a chair. "My God!" she whispered, and crumpled up, rather than sat down.

"It's you," she said.

"No," said Mr. Polly very earnestly, "it isn't. It just looks like me. That's all."

"I know that man wasn't you—all along. I tried to think it was. I tried to think perhaps the water had altered your wrists and feet, and the colour of your hair."

"Ah!"

"I'd always feared you'd come back."

Mr. Polly sat down by his egg. "I haven't come back," he said very earnestly. "Don't you think it."

"'Ow we'll pay back the Insurance now, I don't know."

She was weeping. She produced a handkerchief, and covered her face.

"Look here, Miriam," said Mr. Polly. "I haven't come back, and I'm not coming back. I'm—I'm a Visitant from Another World. You shut up about me, and I'll shut up about myself. I came back because I thought you might be hard up, or in trouble, or some silly thing like that. Now I see you again—I'm satisfied. I'm satisfied completely. See? I'm going to absquatulate, see? Hey Presto, right away."

He turned to his tea for a moment, finished his cup noisily, stood up.
"Don’t you think you’re going to see me again," he said, "for you ain’t."
He moved to the door.
"That was a tasty egg," he said hovered for a second and vanished. . . .
Annie was in the shop.
"The missus has had a bit of a shock," he remarked.
"Got some sort of fancy about a ghost. Can’t make it out quite. So long!"
And he had gone.

Mr. Polly sat beside the fat woman at one of the little green tables at the back of the Potwell Inn, and struggled with the mystery of life. It was one of those evenings serenely luminous, amply and atmospherically still, when the river bend was at its best. A swan floated against the dark green masses of the further bank, the stream flowed broad and shining to its destiny, with scarce a ripple—except where the reeds came out from the headland, and the three poplars rose clear and harmonious against the sky of green and yellow. It was as if everything lay securely within a great, warm, friendly globe of crystal sky. It was as safe and enclosed and fearless as a child that has still to be born. It was an evening full of quality of tranquil, unqualified assurance. Mr. Polly’s mind was filled with the persuasion that indeed all things whatsoever must needs be satisfying and complete. It was incredible that life had ever done more than seemed to jar, that there could be any shadow in life save such velvet softnesses as made the setting for that silent swan, or any murmur but the ripple of the water as it swirled round the chained and gently swaying punt. And the mind of Mr. Polly, exalted and made tender by this atmosphere, sought gently, but sought, to draw together the varied memories that came drifting, half submerged, across the circle of his mind.

He spoke in words that seemed like a bent and broken stick thrust suddenly into water, destroying the mirror of the shapes they sought. "Jim’s not coming back again ever," he said. "He got drowned five years ago."
"Where?" asked the fat woman, surprised.
"Miles from here. In the Medway. Away in Kent."
“Lor!” said the fat woman.
“It’s right enough,” said Mr. Polly.
“How d’you know?”
“I went to my home.”
“Where?”
“Don’t matter. I went and found out. He’d been in the water some days. He’d got my clothes, and they’d said it was me.”
“They?”
“It don’t matter. I’m not going back to them.”
The fat woman regarded him silently for some time. Her expression of scrutiny gave way to a quiet satisfaction. Then her brown eyes went to the river.
“Poor Jim,” she said. “’E ’adn’t much Tact—ever.”
She added mildly, “I can’t ’ardly say I’m sorry.”
“Nor me,” said Mr. Polly, and got a step nearer the thought in him. “But it don’t seem much good his having been alive, does it?”
“’E wasn’t much good,” the fat woman admitted. “Ever.”
“I suppose there were things that were good to him,” Mr. Polly speculated. “They weren’t our things.”
His hold slipped again. “I often wonder about life,” he said weakly.
He tried again. “One seems to start in life,” he said, “expecting something. And it doesn’t happen. And it doesn’t matter. One starts with ideas that things are good and things are bad—and it hasn’t much relation to what is good and what is bad. I’ve always been the sceptaceous sort, and it’s always seemed rot to me to pretend men know good from evil. It’s just what I’ve never done. No Adam’s apple stuck in my throat, Ma’am. I don’t own to it.”
He reflected.
“I set fire to a house—once.”
The fat woman started.
“I don’t feel sorry for it. I don’t believe it was a bad thing to do—any more than burning a toy, like I did once when I was a baby. I nearly killed myself with a razor. Who hasn’t?—anyhow gone as far as thinking of it? Most of my time I’ve been half dreaming. I married like a dream almost. I’ve never really planned my life, or set out to live. I happened; things happened to me. It’s so with every
one. Jim couldn’t help himself. I shot at him, and tried to kill him. I dropped the gun and he got it. He very nearly had me. I wasn’t a second too soon—ducking. . . . Awkward—that night was. . . . Ma’am. . . . But I don’t blame him—come to that. Only I don’t see what it’s all up to. . . .

“Like children playing about in a nursery. Hurt themselves at times. . . .

“There’s something that doesn’t mind us,” he resumed presently. “It isn’t what we try to get that we get, it isn’t the good we think we do is good. What makes us happy isn’t our trying, what makes others happy isn’t our trying. There’s a sort of character people like, and stand up for, and a sort they won’t. You got to work it out, and take the consequences. . . . Miriam was always trying.”

“Who was Miriam?” asked the fat woman.

“No one you know. But she used to go about with her brows knit, trying not to do whatever she wanted to do—if ever she did want to do anything——”

He lost himself.

“You can’t help being fat,” said the fat woman, after a pause, trying to get up to his thoughts.

“You can’t,” said Mr. Polly.

“It helps, and it hinders.”

“Like my upside down way of talking.”

“The magistrates wouldn’t ’ave kept on the licence to me if I ’adn’t been fat. . . .”

“Then what have we done,” said Mr. Polly, “to get an evening like this? Lord! Look at it!” He sent his arm round the great curve of the sky.

“If I was a nigger or an Italian I should come out here and sing. I whistle sometimes, but, bless you, it’s singing I’ve got in my mind. Sometimes I think I live for sunsets.”

“I don’t see that it does you any good always looking at sunsets, like you do,” said the fat woman.

“Nor me. But I do. Sunsets and things I was made to like.”

“They don’t help you,” said the fat woman thoughtfully.

“Who cares?” said Mr. Polly.

A deeper strain had come to the fat woman. “You got to die some day,” she said.

“Some things I can’t believe,” said Mr. Polly suddenly,
“and one is your being a skeleton. . . .” He pointed his hand towards the neighbour’s hedge. “Look at ’em—against the yellow—and they’re just stingin’ nettles. Nasty weeds—if you count things by their uses. And no help in the life hereafter. But just look at the look of them!”

“It isn’t only looks,” said the fat woman.

“Whenever there’s signs of a good sunset, and I’m not too busy,” said Mr. Polly, “I’ll come and sit out here.”

The fat woman looked at him with eyes in which contentment struggled with some obscure reluctant protest, and at last turned them slowly to the black nettle pagodas against the golden sky.

“I wish we could,” she said.

“I will.”

The fat woman’s voice sank nearly to the inaudible.

“Not always,” she said.

Mr. Polly was some time before he replied. “Come here always, when I’m a ghost,” he replied.

“Spoil the place for others,” said the fat woman, abandoning her moral solicitudes for a more congenial point of view.

“Not my sort of ghost wouldn’t,” said Mr. Polly, emerging from another long pause. “I’d be a sort of diaphalous feeling—just mellowish and warmish like. . . .”

They said no more, but sat on in the warm twilight, until at last they could scarcely distinguish each other’s faces. They were not so much thinking, as lost in a smooth, still quiet of the mind. A bat flitted by.

“Time we was going in, O’ Party,” said Mr. Polly, standing up. “Supper to get. It’s as you say, we can’t sit here for ever.”
MR. WALKER'S AEROPLANE

ARTHUR MORRISON
ARThur mORRISON is well-known as a novelist, dramatist and writer on Oriental art. His extensive collection of Chinese and Japanese paintings is now in the British Museums. His stories of life in the slums of the East End of London are particularly notable.
MR. WALKER’S AEROPLANE

There is a bow window in the parlour of the Padfield Arms which gives a view of the village street on one hand and of the open road and the fields on the other. Either way offers an attractive walk to an idle man, and I stood in the window in the mood that induces such a man to toss up for it. But a man may be even too idle to toss up, and I left the decision to two unconscious arbitrators; Dan’l Robgent, who, with his stick and his rheumaties, was approaching from the village street, and an unknown bicyclist who was coming up the road from Codham, with many swerves and wobbles, occasioned by desperate twisting of the neck and staring at the sky. Dan’l was close, the bicyclist was comparatively far. Which would pass the window first? With a brisk pedestrian and a cyclist intent on his journey, a dead-heat would seem likely; but Dan’l’s rheumaties and the cyclist’s interest in the heavens introduced factors of uncertainty and gave the chance a sporting interest.

Dan’l Robgent paused and rubbed his toe tenderly with his stick—he was losing ground; but after that refreshment he came on with quite a spurt, and the cyclist brought down his gaze and made a wild swerve to save his balance.

In the end the victory lay with the unwitting Dan’l by the mere distance of the window from the inn door; for there the two met, and the bicyclist dismounted to ask Dan’l some question which was ungraciously received.

“No,” I heard Dan’l say, very severely, “I bain’t seen no hairyplane, so there!”

The bicyclist grinned.

“All right,” he answered. “Keep your hair on, oad ’un! I didn’t mean oad Taff-Pilcher’s!”

And with that he turned to his machine and drifted up the village street.

There were military manoeuvres in this part of Essex, and
a rumour had been heard that aeroplanes were to fly; and this was at a time, before the great war, when aeroplanes were a strange novelty. So that I wondered at Dan'l's indignation as he came stumping into the parlour, grumbling vaguely. I ventured a question.

"That young monkey comes from Codham," said Dan'l Robgent, "an' when a Codham man talks about hairyplanes to a Padfield man that means impudence. Speeches o' chaff, I s'pose they call it; but I call it impudence, to a man oad enough to be his father."

I put my stick in a corner and sat down. Dan'l Robgent sat down, too, and in response to my well-understood signal a mug was planted under his nose ere he was fully settled. He received the mug with a well-bred affectation of surprise, as usual, and wished me excellent health.

"Well," I said, "and who is old Taff-Pilcher?"

"Mr. Taff-Pilcher, sir," said Dan'l, with grave reproof, "is Parlyment candidate for this 'ere division, and a very nice genelman. Them chaps at Codham don't 'preciate him, Codham not bein' in this votin' division, though only three mile off. Mr. Taff-Pilcher looks arter our interests, as is proper, not the Codham people's; and it's my belief he'll be member after next election, he's made hissel that popular. And when he is we shall be all right—them as votes for Mr. Taff-Pilcher, anyway. We shall all get summat for our votes, we shall; we shan't be wheedled out of 'em for nothin' same as we bin ever since I had a vote."

"How much are you to get?" I asked.

"'Tain't legal for a genelman to mention the 'zact amount, no more than 'tain't legal for a genelman to pay it hissel. He's a lawyer, is Mr. Taff-Pilcher, and he knows the law thorough. I've heard my oad father say, in his time, when the law was different, the price o' votes dropped from a sovereign to five shilling paid down afore you went in; then that got to half a crown an' less, an' then nothin' at all. Wholly shameful it was—and has been all my time. But Mr. Taff-Pilcher's a free-hearted genelman, and he's goin' to see things put right again; an' as he won't be payin' hissel he ain't under no temptation to keep it low. And there's goin' to be ashfealt in Padfield street, and 'lectic light, and ping-pong in the workus."

"But what about his aeroplane?"
“Well, ’twasn’t ’zactly his, so to speak, but one as he wasn’t able to send. You see, he’s always been special kind and attentive, has Mr. Taff-Pilcher. It was only a accident that he didn’t get the Lord Mayor o’ Lunnon hisself down to give away the school prizes, an’ he’s the very best cricket umpire we ever had on the field here, an’ football, too. Fine, he is, straight and fair allus, with just a leetle leanin’ towards Padfield, when that ain’t too noticeable. That’s what I like to see—a perfeck fair umpire as won’t give it agin his own side if he can help it. That’s the sort we want.”

“And Codham doesn’t?” I interjected, for the rivalry of Padfield and Codham was intense in cricket and football as in everything else.

“They’re jealous; Codhamites allus are. I dunno what they expect; if they’d got any sense o’ fairness they’d see that their votes ain’t no good to him. But it was about the hairyplane I was tellin’ you. It was in the annual sports—you know what a time we have here at Padfield sports every year. There ain’t nothin’ like that for miles round, and ain’t been since they stopped Codham Fair. Well, it’s wonderful how Mr. Taff-Pilcher went into them sports. We made him judge, o’ course, seein’ how good he was as umpire, an’ that paid us. And he helped us wonderful other ways, too. He didn’t pay for no prizes, you understand, nor suscribe nothin’, ’cos that’s all agin his principles. He’s very partic’lar about his principles, is Mr. Taff-Pilcher, an’ the one we found out about first was that it’s wrong for him to pay out anything in this ’ere constitooency, bein’ same as a speeches o’ bribery as he couldn’t stoop to. But, lor’, you’d never ha’ minded if you’d seen him givin’ the prizes away after the sports; you’d ha’ believed he’d give the hull lot out of his own pocket, the handsome way he did it and the generous way he talked. And it was just the same all through; nobody ever knew before what unimportant sort o’ people the squire and the passon was till they see Mr. Taff-Pilcher a-puttin’ of ’em in the shade at the sports.

“He stuck to his principles about not suscribin’ money, but nobody could call him mean when it was give out he was goin’ to send a hairyplane. Everybody knowed what a expensive thing a hairyplane was, and them chaps as go up in ’em allus charge about a thousand pound a time. He made a little speech about it afore the sports began. He said we
was livin' in stirrin' times, and the march o' progress was astonishing' to be'old. He told us that man, not content with sailin' the stormy deep and travellin' on the firmer terra cotta, had now took to hisself wings to cleave the infinite expense. He said that he was proud and happy to say that a hairyplane was on its way to the spot he loved dearest on earth (meanin' Padfield) at about a hundred an' fifty mile an hour, and conskently might be expected any time in the afternoon, bein' driv by a most noted flyin' genelman o' the name o' Walker. If Mr. Walker successfully braved the perils of the windy element, he said, in his journey from Lunnin, we should hev the glory and delight o' seein' him come a-swoopin' down in graceful circles same as a heagle or a harchangel on to Padfield. It 'ud be agin his principles, he said, to say anythink about the tremenjus expense o' givin' us sich a treat as that, but he hoped we wouldn't forget it. And then we cheered terrific, and the sports began.

"All Padfield and half Codham must ha' gone to bed with stiff necks that night, and I wonder most o' the necks wasn't broke afore they got home. Half the things in the refreshment tent was ate by boys while the chaps in charge was starin' up lookin' for the hairyplane. Them as tried to look for the hairyplane and see the races too got it worst, and you'd think they ought to ha' broke their necks unanimous. Mr. Taff-Pilcher, he was very eager about it, too, as you'd expect; but he didn't let that prevent him bein' faithful to Padfield as judge o' the sports. O' course a judge can't do very much for his pals, even in a country sports where things ain't done particular; but what any judge could do Mr. Taff-Pilcher did, and did wonnerful neat, too. In the final o' the hundred yards' race, when young Bill Parker was comin' up neck and neck with a Codham chap, Bill bein' on the side nearest the judge, it was beautiful to see how he changed the tape from his left to his right hand, just casual like, as he turned round to speak to a committee-man, and just brought it up agin Bill Parker's chest by about six inches. It was one o' the good-naturedest things ever I see done. And he was just as thoughtful all through. I could see it, havin' been in all that when I was a young man, and knowed the comfort of havin' a friendly judge when you're a-takin' off for the long jump, or got a little dab o' cobbler's wax in
the spoon in the egg-and-spoon race. But them Codham chaps took it downright spiteful.

"The afternoon went on, and most o' the sports was over, one after another, and everybody sick and giddy a-starin' at the sky, when there come a telegram for Mr. Taff-Pilcher. That come jist as the sack race was finishin' and there was nothin' more left but the tug-o'-war between Padfield an' Codham. That was allus last, an' a most howlin' outrageous tussle allus, 'cos whichever side wins crow'd over the other for the rest o' the year.

"Well, the telegram come, an' Mr. Taff-Pilcher, he read it, an' took off his hat an' wiped his head and showed the telegram to the committee, an' their faces went as long as fourpenny kites. Everybody saw as something was up, an' some said the hairyplane man was killed for certain, an' what a pity that didn't happen where we could all see it. And then Mr. Taff-Pilcher got up on a chair an' called all the crowd round him an' made another speech. He said it grieved him to the 'art to have to announce that he had just received a telegram from Mr. Walker, saying that his sky-hooks had give way and jammed his wind-sifter, so that he wouldn't be able to get as far as Padfield. Nothin' as could have occurred would ha' grieved him wuss, unless it was that a accident might ha' happened to Mr. Walker instead of his sky-hooks an' his wind-sifter. He need hardly say how 'art-broke he was to see us all disappointed, an' he hoped, at any rate, we wouldn't blame him as was so devoted to our interests. He could only say that after his first pang o' grief at seein' us disappointed his next feelin' was one of 'artfelt thankfulness that Mr. Walker was safe, an' he was sure them was our sentiments, too.

"You never heard sich a shindy o' cheerin' as we give Mr. Taff-Pilcher arter that speech; we cheered him louder than what we'd ha' cheered the hairyplane itself if that had ha' come, an' he was a greater favourite than ever—jist as popular as if that had come. But them Codham chaps was nasty about it, o' course. Sniffed an' snarled an' sneered, they did, an' said there was no flies on oad Taff-Pilcher, an' a telegram came a mighty deal cheaper than a hairyplane. Fair sickenin' to hear 'em, that was; you wouldn't believe people could be so ungrateful.

"It made the Padfield chaps pretty wild, an' they went at
the tug-o'-war that savage that they pulled the Codham team over right bang off the first pull, as soon as Mr. Taff-Pilcher give the word, an' the crowd cheered louder'n ever. Then they crossed over for the second pull, but this time the Codham chaps was all ready, an' wouldn't be done on the rush. It was a long pull an' a tough pull, and it went agin Padfield. That made things ekal, an' the crowd went half frantic when they crossed again for the last pull. This time Mr. Taff-Pilcher quite see what a lot depended on him, and he started 'em very slow and impartial. He had all sorts of a long trouble gettin' the red rag on the rope 'zactly over the mark, an' then when he give warnin' to take a strain it got off again an' he had to begin afresh; an' so on for a minute or two, till at last Jim Bartrip, the biggest chap on the Codham side, he starts sneezin', an' *Pull!*" bawls Mr. Taff-Pilcher at the top of his voice, jist in the nick of time. Lor'! Them Codham chaps jist come over hand over hand like a row o' sacks, Jim Bartrip a-sneezin' an' a-cussin' an' a-scufflin' to get his feet under him, an' everybody on the field howlin' an' dancin' like mad.

"Well, there's no satisfyin' some people. The row them Codham chaps made over losin' that tug-o'-war was positive disgraceful, an' there might almost ha' been a fight if most o' the crowd hadn't been Padfield people. Codham chaps was allus bad losers. They even tried booin' Mr. Taff-Pilcher when he give away the prizes, but that only made the cheers twice as loud, an' at last he was chaired off the field an' all the way to the station. That was the greatest day ever he had in Padfield, an' if the 'lection had been the day after he'd ha' been our member now.

"Well, the prize for the tug-o'-war was a side o' bacon, an' the team was eight. Bedlow, the landlord here, was one o' the team, an' late in the evenin' they brought the side o' bacon here to divide; and with that came trouble. There hadn't never been a side o' bacon give for a prize before, an' it never struck nobody there'd be any difficulty in cuttin' it in eight parts: an' p'raps there mightn't ha' been if they hadn't called in Huxon, the butcher, to do it. But Huxon was that professional an' scientific there was no on' anythink with him. It was agin all the rules, it seemed, to divide a side o' bacon into eight parts. You could divide it into three parts, or five parts, or nine or thirteen; but anythin' else 'ud
be unconstitootional. An' what was more, all them parts was different sizes. It was no good argufyin' with Huxon; no amount o' argufyin' 'ud bring Huxon to go agin the principles of a lifetime.

"There's fore-end, middle, an' gammon," he said, obstinit as pig itself. 'Or there's hock, an' collar, an' two streakies, an' back, an' ribs, an' loin, an' flank, an' gammon, an' corner. An' you can cut your collar in two, an' your loin in two, an' your back in two, an' your streaky in three. An' that's the way pigs is made, an' pigs is bacon, an' you can't cut 'em different, whichever way you go, nohow an' notsoever I''

"Not only was there no argufyin' with Huxon, but he got that excited what between sports day an' laws o' the trade an' wettin' the occasion that presently there was no shuttin' him up, and at closin' time he had to be shoved out forcible, an' went off up the street, shoutin', 'There's hock, an' collar, an' two streakies, an' back, an' ribs, an' loin, an' flank, an' gammon,' an' all the rest on it at the top of his voice.

"So Bedlow shut the door an' told the rest o' the team they was there as his friends till the pint was settled, for the sake o' the licence. And they put the side o' the bacon on the table an' sat all round it for about two hours, plannin' out the cuts, till it turned out as nobody particular wanted the hock an' the whole team was in competition for the gammon. That made a wuss confusion than ever, an' in the middle of it there came a loud tap at the winder, an' everybody jumped. Bedlow jumped highest, 'cos of his licence, though he made sure the pliceman must be in bed long ago. But when they shoved up the winder there was a chap standin' outside all muffled up in jerseys an' sweaters an' sich, with his head all tied up in ear-flaps an' what-not, an' a big pair o' glass goggles all over his face.

"'Come and hold my hairyplane,' says the chap. 'It's in a field along here, an' the wind's gettin' up.'

"'What?' says Bedlow.

"'Didn't expect me, I s'pose,' says the chap. 'I'm late, that's all. I ought to ha' been here this afternoon, but my sky-hooks give way and jammed my wind-sifter. My name's Walker.'

"Them eight big chaps was that amazed you might ha' blown 'em all over with a pea-shooter."
"We—we thought you wasn’t comin’," says Bedlow.

"Oh, I allus turn up, sooner or later," says the chap. ‘I don’t stop as long as I can get my engine to go an’ my sky-hooks to hold firm. The repairs kep’ me hours an’ hours. But can you chaps pull—hard?"

"Rather!" says Bedlow.

"Quite sure?" says Mr. Walker.

"Well, we won the tug-o’-war to-day, anyhow," says Bedlow.

"That’s your sort," says Mr. Walker. ‘Come along quick, ’tis the hairyplane gets damaged. I’ve got my mechanic with me, but it wants all the lot of us to hold it down safe.’

"They all went bundlin’ out in the dark, an’ he took ’em along the road to Wicks’s little three-cornered meddy with the oad stack in it. Half-way they met another muffled-up chap with goggles.

"‘Here, Jones,’ says Mr. Walker, ‘you ought to ha’ kep’ with the hairyplane. Is she all right?"

"Yes, sir," says the man—‘all right as yet. But she lifts awful with every puff o’ wind, an’ she’ll want a lot o’ holding.’

"‘All right, Jones, we’ll hold it,’ says Mr. Walker. ‘Look here, four of you come with me, and the other four go with my man round to the other side o’ the field.’

"So they split out, an’ each party went along the outside o’ the hedge, till Mr. Walker gropes about an’ finds a rope.

"‘Here y’are,’ he says. ‘Stop on this side o’ the hedge an’ catch hold o’ this. Get behind each other an’ take a good hold—you’ll have some hard pullin’ presently. But don’t pull till I give you the word. I’m goin’ over with my man to see the tackle’s all right.’

"With that he climbs over the hedge an’ disappears in the dark. Presently they could hear him a-shoutin’ to his man an’ callin’ out orders, an’ after a little he comes back to his side o’ the hedge an’ calls out, ‘All ready, Jones?’

"‘Yes, sir,’ sings out Jones, over at the other side o’ the field. ‘I’ll cast off as soon as they pull.’

"‘Right,’ says Mr. Walker. ‘All you chaps ready, both sides? Pull!’

"With that they pulled like all possessed, Mr. Walker steadying the rope on his side o’ the hedge an’ encouragin’ ’em."
"'That's right,' he said, 'keep a steady draw on her. She's pullin' now, ain't she?'

'Aye, that she is,' says Bedlow, hangin' on for all he was worth. 'I shouldn't ha' thought there could be sich a wind a night like this.'

'Oh, any sort of a little breeze is terrific, once it gets under a hairyplane,' says Mr. Walker. 'All right, steady; don't jerk. Just a steady, even pull's what's wanted. This hairyplane o' mine's worth thousands, and I wouldn't have it damaged on any account. Hang on tight; the insurance company pays big salvage for a job like this.'

'H-how much?' says Bedlow, gaspin' an' pullin'.

'Seven an' three-quarters per cent,' says Mr. Walker. 'You can work it all out while you're pullin'. There's eight of you. Divide seven an' three-quarters by eight, an' that'll give you each man's percentage. Steady on! Keep pullin', an' don't slide into the ditch. You're doin' splendid. I don't wonder you won the tug-o'-war to-day. I'd like to have a team o' chaps like you pullin' for me always.'

'That was past one in the mornin' when they came out, an' Mr. Walker kep' on encouragin' 'em an' workin' out percentages till it was very near two and they was half dead. Then he said:

'Keep steady, and I'll go and see how she's gettin' on. P'raps me an' my man can hang the sky-hooks on the safety-valve an' give you a bit of a rest. But don't stop pullin' till I tell you.'

'He called out to Jones an' went off to meet him. Bedlow and the other chaps hung on somehow an' waited, but they heard no more of him. After a bit Bedlow sings out:

'Mr. Walker! Mr. Walker!'

'Not a word of answer did they get, but presently the voice of Sam Gill from the other side o' the field callin' out most pathetic:

'Mr. Walker! We can't stick this here much longer!'

And Bedlow cries out again:

'Mr. Walker! Flesh an' blood can't stand this no more. Is them sky-hooks hung on the safety-valve? Can't we take a rest?'

'Then they heard Sam Gill again complainin' most mollon-colly in the distance, an' presently says Bill Wood behind Bedlow:

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"'This here hairyplane's easing up. It don't pull half as hard as it did.'

"And once more they heard Sam Gill across the field:

"'D'ye hear, Mr. Walker? We're a-goin' to let go!'

"With that the rope went all slack, an' they stood up and shouted across the hedge to Sam Gill. It was must beginning to get a little grey in the sky, and things wasn't so pitch dark.

"'I can't see no hairyplane,' says Bill Wood.

"'I can't see nothin' at all,' says Bedlow.

"'An' they couldn't. 'Cause why? There was nothin' there. There was no hairyplane, an' no Mr. Walker, an' no Jones. Nothing but a precious long rope with half o' the Padfield tug-o'-war team at each end of it!

"They got over the hedge an' met in the middle o' the field, and then they all got a presentiment at once.

"'Them Codham chaps l' says some on 'em, an' 'That side o' bacon l' says all eight. And with that they runned headlong. But they were too late. There was the gas still a-burnin' an' the winder an' the door open, but the side o' bacon were gone, an' nobody in Padfield ever see it again.

And it was only when he went to draw some water in the mornin' that Bedlow found out that that precious long rope they'd all a-been pullin' on was the rope out of his own well.

"There's been more'n one fight since then when Codham chaps ha' called out: 'Mr. Walker! Can't we have a rest?' on market-days or what not. An' there was one in the bar o' this very house when Jim Bartrip, the big chap as slipped in the Codham team, came in an' told Huxon that if he didn't know how to divide a side o' bacon into eight fair parts he could teach him, havin' seen that done quite lately.

"'How?' asks Huxon, very disputatious.

"'Cut it all up in rashers an' weigh 'em out, you silly chump,' says Jim Bartrip."

And Dan'l Robgent turned to his pot once more, with a long grumble wherein only the word "impidence" was clearly distinguishable.
THE FIRE AT THE COLONEL'S

T. O. BEACHCROFT
T. O. BEACHCROFT tried to be funny
In order to make some money
But he never found there was much in fun
Until he got taken by Hutchinson.
THE FIRE AT THE COLONEL’S

“Well, Goulder, mustn’t stand here talking all day. Good morning. Good morning. Good morning.”

Colonel Aintree was concluding a heavy order with Arthur Goulder, proprietor of the grocer’s shop, principal bass in the choir, and one of the substantial citizens of Edgerly. On his way out another idea seemed to strike the colonel.

“By the way, Goulder,” he said, turning back. “They tell me you’re captain of the fire-brigade: I wish you’d let me come along and see one of your drills. I’m just interested, you know.”

Goulder looked rather blank and nodded: by the time he had recollected that he really was captain of the fire-brigade, the colonel was off again.

“D’you find the men pretty enthusiastic?” he said. “Let’s see, who have you got? There’s old Ted Lorimer, isn’t there, and his boys?”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Goulder. “There’s the Lorimers, and the two Gomshalls, and Mr. Franklin from the Lower Farm, and my young nephew Percy, and—well, I’ll get the list and show you, sir, some time. Oh, yes, they’re enthusiastic enough. I wouldn’t say they weren’t that. I’ve no complaints to make there: it’s the time like that’s the difficulty round here.”

“Oh, yes, I can quite see that,” said the colonel, “busy men: busy men: I know. That’s just what was in my mind. I was just thinking as I was such an idle fellow these days I ought to do something to lend a hand. Can’t stand being idle, you know, Goulder. Feel I’ve got to put my shoulder to the wheel somewhere. Now you’re busy. I’m at your service. What do you say, Goulder? What do you say about it?”

“Well, sir,” said Goulder doubtfully, “we’d be much
obliged, sir, of course. I know I can say that on behalf of us all. But I don’t really know that I quite get. . . .”

“Very good then, Goulder,” said the colonel. “Excellent. I shall be only too glad. Now when’s your next drill? No need for me to waste time. When’s the very next one fixed? Saturday? Wednesday evening?”

“Well,” said Goulder, looking up and down the road as if he were hoping for someone to consult, “I don’t rightly know when we can fix one up. Not just this very week or so. You see, it’s the time that’s so difficult nowadays. Since the War everybody’s had their bit of allotment—and then there’s that picture-house opened in Edgminster, and a regular bus service every evening—and the cricket club too, and one thing and another. There’s Ted Lorimer has just bought an old Morris, and he and his two lads were messing about with it all last Saturday evening. We were to have had a meeting then, but I didn’t want to disoblige them, especially as Ted’s been a member since before I was captain.”

“Well, how about next Saturday?”

“That ain’t much good. There’s them sports: you fixed that up yourself, sir.”

“Yes, sports, of course. Well, a weekday evening, then.”

“I don’t like to suggest it, sir, really I don’t, not now we’re right on to haymaking, and the weather likely to break. But there, to tell you the truth, sir, I don’t really worry ’em too much about these practices. They all know what’s wanted when the time arrives. I don’t think there’s any real need for it, just at present.”

“Oh, yes, yes,” said the colonel, “perhaps you’re right: you know best, Goulder. And you’re quite certain they’re really keen, are you?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Still, I think you ought to get some way of getting them together from time to time. New methods to be learnt, aren’t there?”

“Oh, well, we meet from time to time,” said Goulder, “to talk things out a bit. You can be sure of that, sir. There’s the committee, and the annual dinner down at the ‘Edgerly Arms.’”

“Excellent,” said the colonel. “Excellent. Well, I must
be off. My wife's got a lunch party or something. Good day, Boulder, good day."

It was noon on a hot August day. The village seemed asleep; the only thing moving was a fat old spaniel who waddled panting from the sunlight into the shade. The road was white and dusty. The long grasses and weeds in the unkempt ditch were dusty too, and the whole village seemed to give out exhalations of drowsy heat. Colonel Aintree received the impression that Edgerly was wrapped in the slumber, not of a hot day, but of centuries.

After the colonel had entertained his lunch guests, had strolled with them across his perfect lawn, had lingered over the new hard tennis court, the roses, the pig-sties, and most important of all, the horses, and had finally waved them away up the road, he sat down in his summer-house: not to sleep, as many men would have done, but to light a cigar and to engage, wrapped in its fragrant clouds, in active thought.

The colonel was an active man. He liked others to be active too. He did not believe that any man's talents were given to rust in him unused. He liked people to come out and do things in public for the greater glory of the community that produced them—whether this was a battalion of soldiers, or merely the village of Edgerly.

If a neighbour dabbled knowledgeable in rose trees, the colonel would coerce him into exhibiting at the Edgerly Flower Show. If someone had formed the habit of dropping into the old vicar's for a weekly tittle-tattle and glass of port under the notion of playing chess, he would be hailed jovially by the colonel as Capablanca: cuttings of chess problems from Sunday papers would be ceremoniously kept for him: and sooner or later, unless he left the district, he would find himself involved in a local chess tournament. In this way the colonel called upon one and all to give an account of their stewardship.

It was only a few months since the colonel had returned home after years of service. He had already breathed new life into the cricket club, equipped it with a club cup, a fixture list, had even collected subscriptions. He had sent magazines coursing with unknown speed round the magazine club. He had whipped up the dart-playing at the “Edgerly Arms” with an American tournament. Now he was saying to himself in the summer-house: "What about this fire-brigade?
What are these fellows up to? What are they at? What can I do about it?"

For a few days the colonel did nothing and said nothing about the fire-brigade to Goulder or to anyone. Goulder hoped he had handled the colonel firmly but tactfully, and managed to steer him off the whole idea. But the colonel went on smoking cigars in his summer-house.

Some evenings later he passed Goulder in the village. It was Friday, and Goulder was coming away from choir practice.

The colonel’s weather-beaten Sunbeam tourer came stealthily up from behind and stopped alongside of him.

“Good evening, Goulder,” said the colonel. “Good evening."

“Good evening, sir,” said Goulder.

“Well,” said the colonel, “new anthem going on well, I hope?”

“Oh, it’s well enough, sir,” said Goulder. “If only them boys weren’t so frightened of coming in on their leads: that’s always the trouble in a smallish choir. Once they get the treble part going they can do it pretty nice. I don’t know what it is quite. They seem to be frightened at starting.”

“Well, you must keep ’em at it, eh? Rub it into them well,” said the colonel, feeling slightly out of his depth.

“Mind you,” said Goulder, “I don’t say that it’s an easy anthem to sing. It’s not. I don’t think anyone would allow that.”

“Still,” said the colonel, “it’s the hard things that are worth doing. Well, I must move off. Got to take one of the horses up to the vet. in half an hour. Good evening, Goulder. Good evening.”

He began to move away.

“Oh, by the by,” he suddenly said, stopping again.

“Wait a minute. I’ve been doing some thinking, Goulder. About the fire-brigade. I’ve been putting in what you might call a little staff work. Got an idea going: just an idea.”

Goulder nodded and began to look uneasily towards his own cottage.

“Yes, sir,” he said.

“It’s a very good thing for a place like this to have a fire-brigade of its own,” said the colonel. “I was very
pleased to find there was one. 'Specially as you're all experienced people. That's pretty good for Edgerly, in my opinion. But I think you people ought to have a bit of chance to show us all your paces. It's dull work having nothing very much to do—and nothing but practices.'

Goulding smiled uneasily. Did the colonel know they hadn't had a practice for three years?

"Well," said the colonel, "I agree with what you were saying the other night. We'll cut the practice out for a bit: go easy on the routine work, so to speak."

Goulding assented.

"Very good," said the colonel. "Very good indeed. But I've got a better idea still. I want all you chaps to have a treat—something to show off on." The colonel chuckled, and his bright blue eyes twinkled at Goulding. "Now what I mean is this, Goulding. What about a little fire? Eh? What about a fire? Just something to show off on? What d'you think about it, Goulding? What d'you think?"

"Well," said Goulding, "I don't just quite follow your meaning at the minute, sir. Fires are serious things. You can't go playing about with fires. I don't quite see how you could go making a fire, sir. Suppose we couldn't get it under. Supposing it went wrong. Why there's arson to think of: it might come under wilful arson."

"I think we can get round that all right," said the colonel.

"You'll excuse my saying so, sir, but if you'd had the experience with fires as I've had, you wouldn't suggest such a thing. Once you've seen a blaze up properly going, and been near the thing, you don't think fire a thing to go playing about with. The burnt child shuns playing with the fire, sir, as they say. And the fireman shuns it too. He knows too much about it."

"You're quite right, Goulding," said the colonel, "quite right. Quite right. But I never meant to carry it to such lengths. And anyhow, it would only be my own property."

"You mean really, sir, you could pretend something was on fire?"

The colonel nodded.

"Well, sir," said Goulding, "just as you like: but still, I don't really see what good it would do."

"Of course it will do good," said the colonel. "Of course it will do good. And you'll enjoy it. So will the
men. That’s the idea. It’ll add keenness and spirit to the whole thing, and everybody will talk about it for weeks afterwards. All you’ve got to do is to give me your cooperation. Mind you, I’m not going to ask for anything difficult.”

Goulder waited.

“To-morrow,” said the colonel, “is Saturday. And it’s the day of the cricket match against Edgecombe, isn’t it? Are we going to win?”

“I think we ought to,” said Goulder.

“That’s excellent. Well, the idea is this. You’ll have everybody down on the cricket field, and probably all the members of the fire-brigade will be there too, either playing or watching. What?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, in the course of the afternoon I shall ring up the post office from my house and get them to send a message to say I’ve got a fire on at my home. How’s that?”

“I don’t really see that such lengths of actions is really actually called for,” said Goulder.

“All you have to do,” said the colonel, “is to turn out in your smartest style and bring the fire-engine along. You’ll have half the village already collected simply to see how well you do it. Then comes my little bit. When you’ve got your hoses out and a good stream of water playing, I shall come forward and congratulate you in public. Shan’t let on it’s all arranged between us, of course. Then I shall take the occasion to talk about the need for new equipment and anything else you want: and how much a well-run fire-brigade means, and all the rest of it. Get the idea, Goulder? You’ll have a fresh interest and enthusiasm all over the place: more recruits if you want them: a live fund for purchases—and we can buck the whole thing up no end. Good idea, isn’t it, Goulder? Don’t you think so?”

Goulder smiled a rather sickly smile.

“Sounds interesting, sir,” he said. “But there’s one or two points. For instance, is the message to say your house is on fire? Because it seems to me it would be too easy for anyone to see as that wasn’t really so. You don’t want to have it afire really?”

“No. No. No. Not at all,” said the colonel. “Of course not.”
“Well, if I might suggest, sir,” said Goulder, “let’s make it the stables. That’ll seem more likely, sir, if you know what I mean. They can’t be seen from the road. Stables catches fire easy, as I’ve often had experience of: all the straw and wooden partitions. If you take my advice, sir, I think we should make it the stables.”

“Right,” said the colonel. “Quite right, Goulder. A sound notion. We’ll make it the stables. But doesn’t that mean it will be all the more difficult for you. You’ll have to come round by the little lane behind the church and then in at my yard gate. The lane’s fearfully bad. Can you manage it?”

“That’s all right,” said Goulder. “If it’s difficult, there’s all the more reason for us doing it: as you said yourself just now.”

“Excellent,” said the colonel. “That’s the idea, Goulder, since you feel like that about it. Well, I must just get along to the ‘Edgerly Arms’ and see old Lorimer about a large cask of beer to wind up the proceedings with. Good night. Good night.”

He let in his clutch and sped away.

In suggesting the stables, Goulder had not been in the least interested in the points that he had mentioned to the colonel. He knew one thing which the colonel did not know. There was a hydrant just outside the colonel’s stable yard. The location of the stables would thus make his task, not as he had suggested, more difficult, but very much more easy. This thought gave him comfort. With that hydrant so close, he thought, they really might make a good, smart, speedy job of it, and get a good stream of water going rapidly. That was what would impress the colonel, as it impressed all amateurs: if only nothing went wrong. Goulder sighed.

Later in the evening he felt impelled to drop down to the “Edgerly Arms” and have a talk with the owner, Ted Lorimer, his lifelong friend and chief henchman in the fire-brigade. But he could derive no real comfort from Ted. Ted didn’t really grasp the point at issue.

“Why, don’t worry about it, Arthur,” he said. “Whatever be the matter, boy? I think the colonel’s idea’s a good ’un: specially as I’ve just sold him a whole hogshead of old and mild on the strength of it. The colonel’s a lad,
ain’t he? But he knows what he’s at, and this is going to set everything to rights.”

“Ah,” said Goulder. “I dare say you’re right.”

But he knew well enough what the colonel’s true aim and object was. The activities of the fire-brigade had long since become nominal. Even the engine was an antiquated horse-drawn vehicle. Of late years they had come to rely for practical purposes on the smart brigade from Edgeminster. But the colonel did not approve of anybody’s activities being nominal: least of all those of fire-brigades. And Goulder knew well enough that the fire-brigade was being cajoled into a public display of awful ignorance. The colonel obviously intended that this should deliver the whole thing up into his own hands, and Goulder would be politely edged from his captaincy. Goulder sighed, and homeward plodded his weary way.

In the course of the following afternoon, while the cricket match was proceeding, Goulder uneasily broached to most of his command the subject of possible fires. There hadn’t been a fire for years, he pointed out. There might be a fire almost any day now. Did they feel fully confident about their jobs? But they all did.

“Why, good Lord, Arthur,” said Ted Lorimer, “it’s all right. We’ve been in the fire-brigade, some of us, man and boy twenty-five years now, and seen some fires, too. At least, some of us have. Besides, we aren’t fools, are we? Look at that old Morris I bought—me and my boys got that going fine. If a man can fix a car, it shows he won’t have much trouble with a fire-engine. Oh, well hit, Henry! See that, Arthur? That’ll teach ’em to bowl leg theory.”

Lorimer clapped vigorously as his younger son banged blindly at a wide half-volley and by good luck clouted it over square-leg’s head.

As the afternoon passed by, Goulder began to hope against hope that the colonel was going to put the occasion off: but sure enough at five o’clock, as excitement in the cricket began to die down, a boy was seen running across the field.

“Mr. Goulder, Mr. Goulder,” he shouted shrilly, “there’s a telephone message just come from Colonel Aintree: his stables is afire. Where’s Mr. Goulder? Burning terrible, the colonel said.”
In a moment Goulders and everyone else had the news.

"Collect everybody," Goulders instructed Ted from the midst of an excited throng, "and join me at the fire-station."

Goulders then seized and mounted a bicycle that someone thrust into his hands, and pedalled furiously towards the village. He had never felt such misgivings on the few occasions he had received calls to genuine fires. The fire-station consisted of one shed adjoining the "Edgerly Arms," in which the engine was housed. Towards this Goulders hastened, with the crowd streaming out behind him. Now the "Edgerly Arms" was about a quarter of a mile from the cricket field, and Colonel Aintree's house was a mile from the "Edgerly Arms." The colonel stood at the drive gate, watch in hand. He reckoned thus. Five minutes was a generous allowance from the cricket field to the fire-station, allowing time to collect everyone. Five minutes, then, from the time of hanging up his receiver, he regarded at zero hour. He had read that a well-conducted fire-brigade takes about three minutes to get away after receiving an alarm: in fact he had seen it done.

He thought this rather too much to expect of Edgerly, so he decided to double the allowance and call it six. Ten minutes seemed a very comfortable allowance to bring the fire-engine along to his house. He therefore reckoned that he would regard as first-class an appearance in round about fifteen or sixteen minutes from zero hour: after twenty minutes, it would be second-class: after that, only fair: after half an hour, pretty bad.

The hose would begin to play, he presumed, almost simultaneously with the arrival of the engine. So there he stood ready, watch in hand. At zero hour, Goulders actually did stand at the door of the fire-station, awaiting his men. In the course of five minutes eight of them, out of eleven, assembled, and a great many other people too. Ted Lorimer and his two sons, almost alone among the inhabitants of Edgerly, were absent. For some two minutes Goulders and his eight stood irresolute. Then Willie Lorimer arrived.

"Dad's a-starting up the old car," he said. "He reckoned that 'ud be quicker: he's bringing Henry with him."

The crowd waited. At about ten minutes after zero hour Ted Lorimer and his offspring arrived amidst much
blue smoke and deafening explosions from their car. The crowd gave vent to their relief in a subdued murmur of excitement, mounting almost to a cheer. All would now be well; the colonel’s stables would be saved.

“All ready?” said Goulder. “Now for it!”

Goulder advanced to the door of the shed. After all, they were reliable chaps, splendid chaps; no reason at all why they should not acquit themselves with credit. Especially with a hydrant on the spot; that was a tremendous comfort to him, and he congratulated himself on his little bit of cleverness in arranging things so well. Then he found that the door of the fire-station was locked. It was now most unusual that it should be locked, but it was so now. The key was in the top left-hand drawer of the bureau in his front room.

Fortunately, distances are short in Edgerly. By the time Willie Lorimer had extracted one terrific report from the motor-car, a runner arrived with the key. The time allowed for a first-class according to the colonel’s system was now over.

“All ready,” said Goulder once again. “Come on.”

Goulder swung the door open; the inside of the fire-station was exposed to the public eye. As a matter of fact, it was perfectly familiar to them all; only during the last three years everybody had forgotten that it was the fire-station. It had degenerated because it was conveniently situated for that purpose, into a kind of communal dumping ground for baskets on market day. Everybody slung their empties in there, and there they were, ready for use when wanted. Thus a gradual accumulation of old baskets had gone on in the fire-station for three years or more. They didn’t belong to anyone in particular; people just took them as needed and shied them back again. There must have been two hundred or more piled from floor to ceiling. Behind them, and underneath them, the red paint of the antique engine gleamed faintly.

However, baskets are easy to lift, and helpers were plentiful. A perfect hail of baskets began to shoot from the doorway, and in very little more than three minutes the fire-engine was reached: in another three it was completely disentangled (eighteen minutes past zero hour). Uniforms and helmets hanging on the wall were quickly donned.
Meanwhile, Goulder and Ted Lorimer had been in anxious consultation with Percy Bond concerning Brown Bess. Brown Bess, the official motive power of the fire-engine, and the property of Percy, was always kept at the inn stables, so as to be ready for an emergency.

In her unofficial moments she had been accustomed to draw the Bond wagonette and spring cart. But this particular summer, what with purchase of a Ford van and the failing faculties of Bess, Percy had put her out to grass. She was now on the hillside two miles away.

As soon as this was made known, the resources of Edgerly were placed at the captain’s disposal: and within another five minutes a couple of men had been detailed to harness and fetch the nearest horse.

“Come on, Ted,” said Goulder, “while the horse is coming, we’ll have her out on the road by hand.” Groans and shouts issued.

“Errup! Heeeeeeve-o! That’s got her! And again! Heeeeeeve-o! Right!” With creaks of protest the engine moved forward.

“That’s got her! Steady now! Ease up a bit. Easy! Steady on! Steady! Hi!”

The ground from the shed to the roadway was a pretty steep slope; only some six yards, but quite enough for even a small and out-of-date fire-engine to get out of hand. It appeared to become possessed of an evil spirit, and, tearing itself from everybody’s grasp, plunged down the bank. On striking the upward camber of the road the front wheels and shafts swung round sideways. There was a crash, a grinding noise and a sharp crack. One corner of the engine gently kissed the earth. The near fore wheel had broken to smithereens. The front axle was obviously very unwell.

At this moment a fine shire chestnut, ready harnessed, was led up at a clattering trot. (Twenty-seven minutes after zero hour.)

“I don’t know,” said Goulder, surveying the wreck. “Best send a message up to say we can’t get there.”

“Can’t be blasted,” said Ted Lorimer. “We’re a-going to get there. I ain’t going to let the colonel’s stables burn down.”

Ten minutes discussion followed, in which the members of the fire-brigade and all the village took part. Meanwhile
eye-witnesses began to arrive from the colonel’s house with
the news that the colonel seemed to have got the fire well
in hand unaided, and that they didn’t rightly see that there
was any real call for the fire-engine. These, however, were
counteracted by a second phone call from the colonel to the inn
to say that he was anxiously awaiting the fire-engine’s arrival.

Gradually the truth began to dawn upon the village.
In a spirit of genial ribaldry they joined in the discussion,
suggesting many means of transporting the fire-engine to
the colonel’s front door.

“Hey, Arthur, what about my wheelbarrow?”
“Put it in the post, I should.”
“I’ll make yer a new wheel on Monday, Arthur, only
tell the colonel to keep his fire going!”
“I don’t care a damn,” shouted Ted Lorimer, “the colonel
asked for the blasted fire-engine, and I blasted-well ain’t
going to bed till he gets it! So tell him to put that in his
stables and burn it!”

“Quite right, Mr. Lorimer. You let him have it. Don’t
let the colonel play with you!”
say?”
“I don’t know,” answered Goulder. “I really don’t
know at all!”

He sighed heavily: his worst fears were being fulfilled.

It being by now six o’clock (and fifty minutes past zero
hour), the fire-brigade, and with them other public-spirited
helpers, drifted into the bar of the inn, where they set them-
selves, with the aid of drink, to solve the problem. Gusts
of argument arose.

To get the fire-engine moving on its own wheels before
Monday was evidently impracticable. The notion of crowd-
ing sufficient men underneath it to lift it bodily and carry it
shoulder high down the road seemed feasible, and was only
put out of court by actual test—one hour and fifteen minutes
having by then slipped away. To fix up the broken wheel
with a skid and harness a couple of good farmhorses appeared
possible: but the bent axle had also jammed the other front
wheel, and two skids on the gritty road were out of the
question. Half an hour elapsed while this scheme was being
tried out.

At last Mr. Franklin of the Lower Farm had an idea.
Only that week he had hired a lorry to move some bricks on his land. If the fire-engine could be placed on the lorry, all would be well. It certainly seemed worth trying. So the lorry was fetched.

By this time the original issue of the whole business—which was a supposed fire at the colonel's—had been entirely merged in the new consideration, of taking the fire-engine to the colonel’s house somehow. No matter whether the fire had gone out or burnt out, or if there had never been a fire, the point was to show the colonel that the Edgerly fire-brigade was capable of overcoming all difficulties.

Ropes and big baulks of timber were fetched, and in half an hour the fire-engine was lifted bodily from its under-carriage and hoisted on board the lorry.

At two hours and three-quarters past zero hour, the lorry, with the fire-engine perched on its back and the fire-brigade on top of this, roared away from the fire-station, with the crowd trailing out behind it, and ten minutes later—banged itself to a standstill at the end of the colonel's drive.

The colonel, who had been keeping himself informed of the progress of affairs, was waiting—watch in hand.

“Well—here we are, sir,” said Goulder, sheepishly, rather wondering what was supposed to happen next, and feeling very bitterly towards the colonel.

“Two hours and three-quarters,” bellowed the colonel genially. “Two hours and three-quarters!”

“Well, sir, we had a little difficulty,” said Goulder crossly. In fact. . . .”

“Never mind. Never mind that. Get on with it, now. Stables burning furiously. Get out your hose, quick!”

“Very good, sir. Very good. Here, Ted, jump to it.”

“Right,” said Ted, and in about ten minutes the fire hose was uncoiled, the hand pump was manned, the worst kinks smoothed out, and the nozzle pointed at the colonel’s stables.

An unfortunate thing now happened.

“Ready now, Captain,” said the colonel, still keeping up his joke, “must save those horses.”

Goulder scratched his head.

“Well, I don’t know,” he said, “really I don’t know.”

“What’s up?” shouted Ted.

“Get a move on,” roared the colonel, “what’s the hitch now?”
"I don't know," said Goulder, mournfully, "there always was a hydrant here."
"Course there was," said Ted.
"Well, it's gone!"
"Someone must 'a been and stole it in the night," suggested a voice from the crowd. Loud laughter arose. Even the colonel's eyes twinkled.
"Tell you wot it is," said Willie Lorimer. "Those road-makers. That road were up last year. They damned fools have covered the hydrant up!"
Goulder shook his head and muttered under his breath. The very worst had happened. He only wanted to go home, to lock himself in, and never to hear the words "fire-brigade" mentioned in public for the rest of his life. He looked at the colonel, made a hopeless grimace, and shrugged his shoulders. The field was lost as far as he was concerned.
"Come along in, all you fellows," said the colonel, "come in. Come into the loose-box, and I'll show you a better hydrant than that ever was."
They followed him into the stables.
"There you are," said the colonel. "How about that for a hydrant? How about it? Do you know how to set about that?"
The colonel pointed to a huge cask of beer supported high on trestles in the loose-box. Round it were many jugs and tankards. They all began to help themselves. The colonel liked to do things lavishly.
After the first pints had gone round, the colonel stepped on to a packing-case in one corner and held up his hand for quiet. Goulder, well at the back, began to eye his boots and wonder if he could slip away.
"First of all," said the colonel, in loud tones, shouting down the last whispers, "I want to thank all you men very much. I want especially to thank——"
"Look out, sir. Look out!" cried a voice suddenly. "What's that? Look here!"
Suddenly smoke began to issue from the straw which covered the floor of the loose-box. In two minutes it had crackled up in half a dozen places: some wooden boxes had caught fire: some garden sticks, then the actual partition of the next stall.
"Good God," said the colonel.
Now his stables really were on fire.
The colonel leapt down from his box, pushed his way through the crowd, and began to shout in the stable yard for his groom and gardener.

"Here, Perkins!" he said, "run like hell. Come and help me get those horses out."

Old soldier that the colonel was, he didn’t like the idea of stables on fire. He could hear the flames crackling inside. He had awful visions of his horses refusing to be led out and perishing in the flames. Momentarily he turned pale.

"What are we going to do?" he said to Goulter. "That damned hydrant: I’ve got no water except tap water. Here, all you men," he said, "go into the house. Get all the rugs, pieces of matting, anything you like, to stifle the flames."

"It’s quite all right, sir," said Goulter. "Excuse me pushing you, sir: just leave it to me. Now everyone clear out. I want everyone outside the stables at once. Come on, now."

The colonel stepped aside, flapping his fingers impatiently. At that moment Ted Lorimer appeared. He had run back to the fire-engine and fetched two heavy fireman’s axes. He handed one to Goulter and with the other one pushed everyone aside, went into the stables and slammed the door.

In a few seconds a terrific noise of smashing was heard; followed by a hissing. Instantly volumes of smoke poured out of every crevice. Everyone stood silent. In a few minutes Goulter and Lorimer flung the doors open and staggered out, choking.

They had smashed the hogshead of beer to smithereens with their axes; from its elevation on the trestles fifty or more gallons of old and mild had shot all over the loose box. Every runnel and crack of the floor was filled with beer. Every twist of straw and hay was soaked in an instant. The blazing boxes were quickly covered with the sodden stuff and stifled: the burning partition was swilled with beer from a bucket and smothered in the wet straw. With a few well-directed strokes of their axes Lorimer and Goulter had saved the whole situation.

"I should just get them horses out away from the smoke if I was you, sir," Goulter instructed the colonel.
Half an hour later, the crowd had gone, but Goulder and Lorimer stood in the colonel's dining-room, sipping a glass of his special sherry at the sideboard.

"Well," said the colonel, "here's luck to you. I must say, Goulder, if you'll forgive my saying so—the first part of the evening was—well, not so good. But still, that's all made up for now. I'm grateful—grateful."

"Aha," said Lorimer, drinking his sherry with relish. "Leg-pulling, if you'll excuse my saying so, is a game as two can play at. Give us a mock fire, and a mock call, and you'll see maybe we can be a bit funny, and I hope you'll forgive us for that, sir—though perhaps we shouldn't have done it."

The colonel looked a little blank.

"But give us a real fire, however sudden or unexpected it comes," said Goulder, "and I believe we'd find the quickest way to deal with it. I hope we showed you that."

"Yes, yes," said the colonel. "Certainly."

"There's just one thing as I'd like to add, sir," Lorimer said. "Next week is the annual meeting of the fire-brigade: down at the 'Arms,' sir. I want to take the occasion to propose a special vote of confidence in Arthur's captaincy. And after what's happened, sir, I suppose I can rely on you, sir, to second it."

"What?" said the colonel. "What's that? Er—oh, yes, Lorimer, certainly, certainly. I'll be only too happy. Quite. Yes."

Lorimer thoughtfully fingered in his pocket the box of matches with which he had deliberately fired the straw after a whispered word to Goulder.
THE GHOUL OF GOLDER'S GREEN

MICHAEL ARLEN
MICHAEL ARLEN was born in a village on the Danube, but when he was five years old his parents moved to England and he decided to accompany them. His first book, *The London Venture*, written at eighteen, was a book of confessions, and since then he has charmed London with *The Green Hat*, *Lily Christine* and *Hell I said the Duchess*. 
I t is fortunate that the affair should have happened to Mr. Ralph Wyndham Trevor and be told by him, for Mr. Trevor is a scholar of some authority. It is in a spirit of almost ominous premonition that he begins the tale, telling how he was walking slowly up Davies Street one night when he caught a crab. It need scarcely be said that Davies Street owes its name to that Mary Davies, the heiress, who married into the noble house of Grosvenor. That was years and years ago, of course, and is of no importance whatsoever now, but it may be of interest to students.

It was very late on a winter’s night, and Mr. Trevor was depressed, for he had that evening lost a great deal more than he could afford at the card-game of auction-bridge. Davies Street was deserted; and the moon and Mr. Trevor walked alone towards Berkeley Square. It was not the sort of moon that Mr. Trevor remembered having seen before. It was, indeed, the sort of moon one usually meets only in books or wine. Mr. Trevor was sober.

Nothing happened, Mr. Trevor affirms, for quite a while; he just walked, and, at that corner where Davies Street and Mount Street join together the better to become Berkeley Square, stayed his walking, with the idea that he would soothe his depression with the fumes of a cigarette. His cigarette-case, however, was empty. All London, says Mr. Trevor, appeared to be empty that night. Berkeley Square lay pallid and desolate: looking clear, not as though with moonlight, but with dead daylight; and never a voice to put life into the still streets, never a breeze to play with the bits of paper in the gutters or to sing among the dry boughs of the trees. Berkeley Square looked like nothing so much as an old stage-property that no one had any use for. Mr.
Trevor had no use at all for it; and became definitely antagonistic to it when a taxi-cab crawled wretchedly across the waste white expanse, and the driver, a man in a Homburg hat of green plush, looked into his face with a beseeching look.

"Taxi, sir?" he said.

Mr. Trevor says that, not wanting to hurt the man's feelings, he just looked another way.

"Nice night, sir," said the driver miserably, "for a drive in an 'ackney-carriage."

"I live," said Mr. Trevor with restraint, "only a few doors off. So hackney-carriage to you."

"No luck!" sighed the driver, and accelerated madly away even as Mr. Trevor changed his mind, for would it not be an idea to drive to the nearest coffee-stall and buy some cigarettes? This, however, he was not to do, for there was no other reply to his repeated calls of "Taxi!" but certain heavy blows on the silence of Davies Street behind him.

"Wanting a taxi, sir?" said a voice which could only belong to a policeman.

"Certainly not," said Mr. Trevor bitterly. "I never want a taxi. But now and then a taxi-driver thrusts himself on me and pays me to be seen in his cab, just to give it a tone. Next question."

"Ho!" said the policeman thoughtfully.

"I beg your pardon?" said Mr. Trevor.

"Ho!" said the policeman thoughtfully.

"The extent of your vocabulary," said Mr. Trevor gloomily, "leads me to conclude that you must have been born a gentleman. Have you, in that case, a cigarette you could spare?"

"Gaspers," said the policeman.

"Thank you," said Mr. Trevor, rejecting them. "I am no stranger to ptomaine-poisoning."

"That's funny," said the policeman, "your saying that. I was just thinking of death."

"Death?" said Mr. Trevor.

"You've said it," said the policeman.

"I've said what?" said Mr. Trevor.

"Death," said the policeman.

"Oh, death!" said Mr. Trevor. "I always say 'death,' constable. It's my favourite word."